Sylvia Plath: A Woman, A Mother and A Poet

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Abstract: This Article is a close reading of Sylvia Plath’s poem Three Women: A Poem of Three Voices (1962), a fascinating and profoundly touching piece of art. The poem characterizes three different life situations of a female through three different women characters, say an immature college girl, a professional woman and a mature and content mother. A close reading of the poem can unearth transformations occur to an immature girl during her evolution to a mature mother. This transformation can be compared to the transformations a poet undergoes during his/her way to a distinguished one. This Article deals with the association of three phases of a female and that of a poet.

Index Terms: Exchange Sylvia Plath, Three Women, Womanhood, poet, evolution.

1 INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath, with her tenderness and abruptness, with her sharp and deep emotions, has been intriguing all her readers. Plath is completely consumed by tragic themes like death, pain, trauma, victimization, patriarchy, motherhood and the like. Sylvia Plath’s poem Three Women: A Poem of Three Voices (1962), is a fascinating and profoundly touching piece of art. If you are a woman and a mother, it will be easy for you to comprehend the situations, the emotions and the pain presented by Plath, through the poem. Though the life span of Plath was short, it was packed with personal and literary experiences. With her publication of The Colossus in 1956 and The Bell Jar in 1963 Plath fixed her identity in the literary world. Her poems are extremely personal exploring all her mental turmoil, admission of her guilt, failure, tendency to die. These themes can find a reflection in the writings of Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton. No wonder Plath has got placed among the confessionists and considered her poems as a female version of Robert Lowell works. All her works reflect her inner self one way or the other. Hence we can evidently state that Plath’s works are rooted in her personal experience. Three Women, subtitled, A poem for three voices, is a long poem written by Sylvia Plath, originally for radio broadcast. The Context is the dramatic setting of a maternity ward. All the three women of the poem, who narrate a dissimilar predicament, are patients of the ward. The poem consists of three intertwining interior monologues. In this setting, the three women have their own story to tell. These three women are not named in the poem. They are revealed as the First woman, Second woman and the Third woman or as the First voice, Second voice and the Third voice. Plath identifies three major situations using the three voices to portray three female stereotypes; An adoring wife, an office worker/secretary and a college student. The poem revolves around the three women in order to capture their divergent experience of pregnancy, which reveals a related and influential emotion. The three women labour in cooperation to incorporate mutual and diverse experiences of their motherhood, love and loss. Sylvia Plath proficiently provides a perception of the inner self of the three women. The poet uses psychologically convincing metaphors and images, in order to transfer the compound means through which pregnancy, delivery and infertility influence women. At the beginning of the poem, all the three women are pregnant and Plath explores the difference in their situations as the poem ends. The First Voice is considered the voice of a wedded woman and has a successful natural delivery. Moreover, during the course of the poem, she could take her baby home as well. The secretary, Second Voice, is unsuccessful as she suffers a miscarriage. It is more painful to know that, it is not her first one. The third voice is considered to be that of a college student, who was raped and impregnated. Hers is an unwanted pregnancy and she gives her baby for an adoption soon after the delivery. Sylvia Plath being a woman, a mother and a poet well expresses the themes of Femininity, Motherhood and Poetic inspiration. In this article, I would like to discuss the themes of femininity, motherhood and poetic flairs of Plath through a close reading of the poem. I split this article into three sections for the purpose.

2 FEMININITY AND MOTHERHOOD

2.1 Femininity

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”,(de Beauvoir, n.d. 1949: 267). According to de Beauvoir, femininity is not innate but acquired from the society unknowingly, or sometimes forcefully. The most important biological change that femininity offer is the ability to give birth. The society expects and demands her to be a mother as soon as possible. And a woman should be physically and emotionally prepared and ready for this. In the case of the Student, she is neither physically nor emotionally equipped for it. She is a young immature girl, who has been forcefully impregnated. She is a victim of the male chauvinist society. During the course of the poem, the Girl repeatedly shows her disagreement, “I wasn’t ready”. I wasn’t ready. The white clouds rearing Aside were dragging me in four colours. I wasn’t ready. I had no reverence. I thought I could deny the consequence— But it was too late for that. It was too late, and the face. Went on shaping itself with love, as if I was ready. (Series, 2004:138). According to de Beauvoir, women are treated just as a womb by the patriarchal society. The Girl is a victim of her own reproductive biology. Finally, the Girl ends up abandoning her newborn baby girl for fear of the society’s disapproval of her being a single mother. This act helps her move on in life. “I had an old wound once, but it’s healing. I had a dream of an island, red with cries. It was a dream and did not mean a thing.”(Series, 2004: 144). The Secretary, who suffers from infertility, is a victim of the society as well, for the society believes that femininity is complete only when she becomes a mother. As a result, it finds her guilty “for having children and for not having any”(Cixous, Cohen, & Cohen, 2005: 880). This belief, which she has imbibed from the society, has made her disappointed and she constantly tries to bear a child. The words like ‘bare trees’ show her emptiness in life. She is completely devastated. The colours black, red and white are used in order to symbolize death, disaster and the plight of a
woman who has been through abortions more than once. The First Voice, the Wife, now ‘a successful mother’, is amazed at her productiveness.

I am slow as the world. I am very patient,
Turning through my time, the suns and the stars.
Regarding me with attention.
The moon’s concern is more personal:
She passes and repasses, luminous as a nurse. 
Is she sorry for what will happen? I do not think so. 
She is simply astonished at fertility. 
When I walk out, I am a great event.

(Series, 2004: 137).

She is content with her life and satisfied with the newborn baby boy. In the words of Beauvoir, many women desire a baby boy because of the prestige and privileges they attribute to men. The Wife stays content within the clutches of the society by proving herself to be an ideal woman that the society expects of her. She walks along the trodden path. “I do not have to think, or even rehearse/ What happens in me will happen without attention.” (Series, 2004: 137) The Wife identifies herself with Virgin Mary, being wrapped in blue, the colour of distance and forgetfulness. “Dusk hoods me in blue now, like a Mary/O color of distance and forgetfulness.”(Series, 2004: 139). She is completely content like Virgin Mary. According to Simone de Beauvoir, sex and gender are two different aspects. When the former is completely based on biology, the latter is composed of cultural meanings and forms. A ‘woman’ acquires these cultural meanings to turn herself into a ‘female’. In Beauvoir’s words women are not born, but acquire feminine qualities and try to mould themselves to become women stereotyped by the society. This establishes the transformation of a woman to female. In the poem, all these three females are victims of the culture and system.

2.2 Motherhood
Motherhood is considered to be the ultimate goal of a woman. Simone de Beauvoir also agrees with this (in her book The Second Sex), though she does not accept biology as destiny. It is through motherhood that a woman fully achieves her physiological destiny; that is her “natural” vocation, since her whole organism is directed towards the perpetuation of the species. But we have already shown that human society is never left to nature. And in particular, for about a century, there productive function has no longer been controlled by biological chance alone but by design. Some countries have officially adopted specific methods of birth control; in Catholic countries, it takes place clandestinely: either man practices coitus interruptus, or woman rids her body of the sperm after the sexual act. (de Beauvoir, n.d. 1949: 597). The Wife and The Girl in the poem have achieved this goal. The Wife is happy to have a baby boy.

What did my fingers do before they held him?
What did my heart do, with its love?
I have never seen a thing so clear

His lids are like the lilac-flower
And soft as a moth his breath
(Series, 2004: 140).

On the one hand, we see a happy Wife and on the other a disappointed Girl, who has to abandon her baby girl, an unwanted guest as the consequence of a rape. Beauvoir says that in some situations women are so terribly trapped that she is left with no choice but to abandon her offspring. So did the Girl. To quote; On the other hand, there is little distress more pathetic than that of an isolated and penniless girl who sees herself ensnared in a “crime” to erase a “fault” that people around her consider unpardonable: in France this is the case of approximately 300,000 women employees, secretaries, students, workers, and peasants; illegitimate motherhood is still so terrible a stain that many prefer suicide or infanticide to being an unmarried mother, (de Beauvoir, n.d. 1949: 601-602). Both these women are mothers. According to Beauvoir, there is nothing called ‘maternal instinct’; she declares: “The mother’s attitude is defined by her total situation” (de Beauvoir, n.d. 1949: 629). While some women are “breeders” rather than mothers and lose interest in their child as soon as it is weaned, or as soon as it is born, and only desire another pregnancy, many others by contrast feel that it is the separation itself that gives them the child; it is no longer an indistinct part of themselves but a piece of the world; it no longer secretly haunts the body but can be seen, touched; after the melancholy of delivery, (de Beauvoir, n.d. 1949: 629).

According to Beauvoir, a woman will devote herself wholeheartedly to a newborn only if she receives a man’s support. “But in most cases, a woman needs masculine support to accept her new responsibilities; she will only devote herself joyously to a newborn if a man devotes himself to her”.(de Beauvoir, n.d. 1949: 611). The First Voice accepts her newborn because she is a legitimate wife, whereas illegitimacy and avoidance from the part of The Girl’s seducer enforces her to avoid her newborn. By now it is clear that motherly instinct is not real. Her attitude varies according to the situations she is surrounded by. Hence, the divinity offered to women by society during pregnancy is just to blindfold her. She is no longer an object subjugated by a subject; nor is she any longer a subject anguished by her freedom, she is this ambivalent reality: life. Her body is finally her own since it is the child’s that belongs to her. Society recognizes this possession in her (pregnancy) and endows it with a sacred character. (de Beauvoir, n.d. 1949: 613).

3 POETIC FLAIR
According to Helene Cixous, a woman should use her body as a weapon to open herself, her emotions and her identity. Women should have a feminine style (feminine language) of writing through which they can use their body as a medium of communication in order to speak up all those taboos which have been circumscribed for her by the male discourse. In her book, The Laugh of the Medusa, Cixous asks every woman to stay away from male writing and try to have a female discourse, which can be developed through writing and speaking about female sexuality through the feminine language she has been deprived of. In this poem, Sylvia Plath uses feminine language and speaks about maternity, childbirth and diverse feminine experiences. Plath judges herself through these lines,

I am Silver and exact
I have no pre conceptions
Whatever I see, I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love of dislike.

( cp 154)

Being a poet and a mother Plath juxtaposes her creative capacity as a poet and as a mother. She intertwines three different phases offered by motherhood with the three phases a poet encounters during her development into a mature and accepted poet having her own identity. The three phases of a poet or a creative writer are symbolized in the poem. Since like the three voices a poet treads through three phases as well, Three Women can be read as a poem about maternity and poetic creativity. The first phase of a poet, where she is an immature writer gets reflected in the Girl, the student who has got pregnant unwillingly and gives her child for adoption. The Girl's voice is mostly characterized by death. She experiences her own biological fertility as “dangers, doves”. Allusions to rape and masculine violence suggest her unwillingness. In this hostile background, the girl associates childbirth or creativity with torture, “shrieks” and “flat red moons”, and wishes she had an abortion:

And what if two lives leaked between my thighs?
I have seen the white clean chamber with its instruments.
It is a place of shrieks. It is not happy.
‘This is where you will come when you are ready.’
The night lights are flat red moons. They are dull with blood.
I am not ready for anything to happen.
I should have murdered this that murders me.

(Series, 2004: 139)

Here the girl hates her creation. Her strong feeling of hatred is symbolized through the symbol "red" and the term "terrible" girl, which is far away from the blue boy of the Wife. During the course of the poet's evolution, she encounters these situations in her first phase, where she hates to talk and write about her body and herself. Here both the poet and the student are too young and scared of creation. During the course of the poem, Plath introduces us to a Second Voice, the voice of an 'unproductive' mother, whose sense of guilt and horror is much palpable. Her disappointment and pessimistic attitude are clear when she says she is only able to "create corpse". She finds childbirth "mechanical".

Parts, bits, cogs the shining multiples
I am dying as I sit. I lose a dimension.
Trains roar in my ears, departures, departures!
The silver track of time empties into the distances,
The white sky empties of its promise, like a cup.
These are my feet these mechanical echoes.
Tap, tap, tap, steel pegs. I am found wanting.

(Series, 2004: 137).

A poet also treads through this sort of sterility when her creative skills are powerless to express her overwhelming emotions fruitfully. As a result, she ends up producing unsuccessful poems. The secretary’s own biological sterility is parallel to the poet’s emotional sterility during the creation of a poem. Both the poet and the Secretary dwell in an automatic world where there is an absence of fancy, warmth and imagination, “a world of snow”. The first woman is astonished at her creation. She is a successful mother now. She is proud and content about her creation of a “blue boy”. Once an effective poem is out from a mature poet, the poet, akin to the Wife, (who is supposed to be mature) is a “great event”. According to the woman what happens, happens naturally. This is in contrast to the secretary, who considers childbirth mechanical. In the third phase, the poet becomes experienced and starts producing poems naturally, without any difficulty or artificiality in it. Her creative talent is natural and spontaneous.

"I don't have to think or rehearse/ What happens in me will happen without attention." (Series, 2004: 137). The poet and the Wife experience content after the creation. This is the evolution a poet has gone through. In her first phase, the poet is similar to the immature student and creates something unaccepted. In the second phase, the poet and the secretary want to be creative but are faced sterility. In the third phase, the poet has become mature and creative, and able to produce effective poems. Here the poet is proud of the creation, as does the Wife, whose voice is characterized by the abundant imagery of fertility. The poet walks away from reluctantly written terrible poetry to accepted and well-appreciated poems. The poet develops into an established and renowned one. Sylvia Plath, as a mother and a poet, has successfully embedded the three phases of the development of a poet in the three voices of motherhood. Plath attained most of her fame posthumously. She experienced many struggles and breakdowns in her career. A remarkable fluctuation in the writing career is evident through the remarks of Lowell about her. In 1957 Plath attended the poetry classes of Robert Lowell, who considered Plath’s poetic style as “controlled and modest”. He deliberated Sylvia as a “distinguished, delicate, complicated person in whom there was no inclination of what would come later.” But he was “startled by the burst of talent she later displayed” (Lowell vii-ix). These expressions from the part of Lowell very well displays that the poetic career of Plath had been in a gradual momentum towards perfection.

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