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THE DESCRIPTION OF 'FATHER FIGURE' IN THE POETRY OF SYLVIA PLATH AND KAMALA DAS

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Abstract:

The present paper focuses on the description of 'Father Figure' in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das. As Confessional poets Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das have described father figure in their various poems. Electra complex is a term coined by Sigmund Freud to denote the opposite of Oedipus complex.

KEYWORDS:

Father Figure , poetry . Sylvia Plath , Kamala Das.

INTRODUCTION

This brings out a strong obsession of a daughter towards her father, with a deep-rooted sexual instinct as an undercurrent. It is not easy to overlook this aspect of Sylvia Plath's poetry, though many critics have blown this out of proportion. Pomes like 'Daddy', 'Cut' and 'Fever' can be analyzed from the sensitive angle of 'love-hate' relationship from a sensitive feminine poet. But when it comes to reading of 'The Colossus', 'Lady Lazarus' and the series of bee poems, the confessional streak becomes brighter which emphasize the relationship of the poet with her father, without any overtones. Carole Ferrier, in his recent essay, traces many shades of the father figure and says:

In examining Sylvia Plath's relationship to patriarchy as she perceives and expresses it, I will look at her treatment of the father figure, who variously appear as colossus, drowned man, assorted historical imperialists and tyrants from Napoleon to the Nazis, man in black, and beekeeper. In her later poems, there is an attempt first to consciously realize and then to eliminate or exercise the destructive or repressive aspects of dominating masculinity.¹

Sylvia Plath's father was stern, upright and dark complexioned. There is very little reference to him as a person. In 'Ocean-1212-W' Sylvia Plath gives at least some insight into the character of her grand parents, her mother, brother and even her uncle. The sole mention of her father appears in the closing words.

And this is now it stiffens, my vision
of that seaside childhood. My father
died, we moved inland.²

If there is only a scanty description of her father, however, there is a wealth of suggestion regarding his efforts on the poet's life. 'The Colossus' title poem of her first volume is concerned on the literal level with a broken ancient statue. She feels that his stifling rise has turned her to a stone.

I shall never get you put together entirely,
pieced, glued and properly jointed.
Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles
Proceed from your great lips.
It's worse than a barnyard.³

As a passing phase, she gives up her effort of putting the broken image together and starts searching him, in her lovers. Gordon Lameryer, who was camouflaged as Buddy Willard records his reflection in his essay 'Sylvia at Smith.'

Basically, I think Sylvia wanted someone to replace the father she had lost in childhood. After coming close to me as she had and later did to others. She rejected this suitor as not Godlike enough to be both, father and lover. I later came to feel that Sylvia's narcissism, a fixation caused at the time of father's death, prevented her from loving any- one else fully.⁴

Giving a margin to biographical details, if the critic wants to build up a poetic image of the father figure, strictly from her poem, the poem 'Daddy' is an important one. John Rosenblatt thinks: "by no means it is her best poem."⁴² The poem has Sylvia Plath's most extended treatment of the father symbol. The rapid, often wild succession of elements relating to the father is not entirely integrated into the poem. It opens with a reference to father's black shoe, in which the daughter 'lived like a foot', suggesting her submissiveness and entrapment the poem then moves on to an idealized image of the father.

Sylvia Plath herself describes it in her note about the father fixation in the poem, "The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra Complex. Her father died when she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter, the two strains marry and paralyze each other. She has to act out the awful little allegory once before she is free of it."⁵

The poem starts on the note of a nursery rhyme, recalling the tale of the old lady in the shoe. On a deeper level, she talks about the political implications. Sylvia Plath wants to justify her love towards, her father who was a 'brute' and universalizes feminine psychology when she confesses:

At twenty, I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do. 5

But suddenly the killer instinct comes up, while she expresses in the beginning like:

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time,
.....
.....
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I am through.6

This love towards her dead father, naturally affected the love of her mother, poems like 'Maenad' and 'The Disquieting Muses' which emphasize the strained relationship of mother and daughter makes the critic wonder of the authenticity of the Letter's Home. The soft, innocent love, child-like enthusiasm to share her success with her mother, her friendly confessions the poet seeking advice about a new boy friend- all sound like a fantasy. 'The Disquieting Muses', has a different tone in which the blame is extended.

Mother, mother, what ill-bred aunt
Or what disfigured and unsightly
Cousin did you so unwisely keep
.....
Day now, night now, at head, side, feet,
They stand their vigil in gowns of stone,
Faces blank as the day I was born. 7

Sylvia Plath compromises with her self and comes out of that wrath in her Bee Poems. Sylvia Plath uses the bees as metaphors for a number of different concerns. She herself becomes the queen bee. Her love towards beekeeping, which she had inherited from the father, gives her a solace and also acts as a source of poetic inspiration. She cries for love in vain.

Sylvia Plath's sublimation of her Electra complex and her struggle to reduce the idealization yield fruits, when she enters into wed lock with her beloved Ted Hughes. She forgets her self, in the struggle of life, excuses her parents and thanks her mother for her altruistic temperament. Begetting her own children makes her aware of the sacrifices it demands on the motherhood. Her fame as a poet and awards and prizes as encouragement in the companionship of her 'poet husband' made her complex fade away. But when Ted Hughes fails her in life, she could not excuse him, as she excused her father. She could not take revenge on him directly; least indirectly joined her father in death thus, reviving her Electra complex.

This kind of abnormal obsession is not blatant in the poems of Kamala Das. But the suggestion of unconscious incest can be traced in some of them. The major reason being, that they hail from a different country and different culture. Indian tradition cannot accept Freud's shocking ideas of this incest. But it is natural for girl of any country or continent, to love her father deeply and try to search for such qualities in other men, the qualities, which have made a strong impression on her emotion. Her father was building up his career and did not take much interest in his not-so-healthy wife and neglected the children too. Kamala Das recalls:

My father was always busy with his work at the automobile firm where he was employed, selling Rolls Royce, Humbers and Bentleys to the Indian Princes and their relatives. My mother, vague and indifferent, spent her time lying on her belly... .. so we grew up more or less neglected and became we were aware of ourselves as neglected children.⁸

When Kamala Das was nine years old, her father, used to come home on leave. He found her to have become rustic for his liking and admitted her into a boarding school run by Roman Catholics. Kamala Das looks up on this period as a black period and records her reactions in the poem 'Punishment in Kindergarten'.

Children are funny thing, they laugh
In mirth at other's tears, I buried
My face in the sun-warmed hedge
And smelt the flowers and the pain.⁹

She wants to erase the memory of that bitter experience where she was humiliated for no fault of hers but of her father's as he was responsible in pushing her off to school which was managed by 'blue frocked women, fair-skinned old maids' who had become morbid because of their forced spinster-hood. But, Kamala Das could not excuse her father for his hasty decision of marrying her at the age of fifteen. She does not give many details of her husband either in My Story or her poetry. The over-all picture that we can get is that of man much older to her in age, with a different temperament. His brutal attitude towards sex starts reminding her about her father. She recollects:

I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke. My face, my hair, my heads and whisper loving words. I had expected him to give all that I wanted: conversation, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts¹⁰

From that stage onwards, she could not forget that her father was responsible for her miserable experience. Though she claims that she had reached an age when she can excuse all people, it sounds only as forgetting not forgiving.

In the poem 'An Introduction' there is a direct accusation of her father, who had betrayed her:

I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bed room and closed the door He did not beat me
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.¹¹

The treatment of the father figure in Kamala Das is different from Sylvia Plath again for another reason that her father did not relieve her by 'death'. He lived up to a ripe old age and passed away recently. Kamala Das, has paid an eloquent tribute to him through her poems. Her tender love towards him gives her the choicest language. She admires his optimism and love of life and confesses that she would exchange places with him in death, as she was never afraid of death.

Kamala Das surprises her readers when she looks at her father's death as a scene from the drama of life. In her recently published poem, 'My Father's Death,' she looks at the incident as an opportunity to be more confessional. There is a tinge of envy at her father who died an important man because she feels that his success was at the cost of his family. The love, which was due to her was deprived. She even mocks at him:

He was generous with money,
As generous as I was with
love. There was a cloud of tension
between him and me."¹²

Her confessions become more intense as the poem moves on:

Did he seem close to me, and I
Whispered into his ears that I
Loved him although I was bad, a bad
Daughter, a writer of tales that
Hurt, but in the task of loving¹³

She could not restrain herself from chiding her dead father.

You should have hugged me, father, just
Once held me to your breast, you should
have asked me who I was, in truth.
You gave my sons each a hundred
Rupee note, you purchased their brief
Devotion, my price was too high
For you, your wallet could not hold
abstract currency. Talking and
Talking of family bonds will not grow in them, you know . . .¹⁴

Thus, there is ample evidence to say that Kamala Das too suffered from the Electra complex like Sylvia Plath. But her relationship with her father was something different. She had to be different from Sylvia Plath, in her own unique way; because she is a typical, traditional Indian woman. She could not go further than this, for an Indian mind the idea of Electra complex, in true sense of the world, is neither acceptable nor convincing.

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