

NAME OF THE CANDIDATE: VED PARKASH

NAME OF THE SUPERVISOR: DR. MUKESH RANJAN

DEPARTMENT: ENGLISH

TITLE: DIALECTIC LIFE AND ART IN THE WORKS OF SYLVIA PLATH

ABSTRACT

The Thesis divided into seven chapters, and prefaced by an Introduction, an attempt is made herein to see not merely Sylvia Plath's poetry in relation to her life, which has too often been done, but also to relate her life to her poetry. This may appear to be not a subtle distinction, but on a close look it is when dialectically studied. Dialectic is an old method, going back to Plato who refused negation in order to achieve his conception of idea or form by rejecting sensuous reality. The last great exponent of dialectic in the nineteenth century, Hegel used negation to subsume opposites by a double negation, as, for example, a bud gives way to a flower and the latter to a fruit. Plath's dialectical method is neither Platonic nor Hegelian, it is Heideggerian, and in it, phenomenological; he asks: why does every dialectic take refuse in negation, without grounding negation itself dialectically, without being able to locate it *as a problem* (his Italic). Plath's life and poetry also attempt to raise this question: Where does negation come from? What is she afraid of? Why was she driven to commit suicide? Like Heidegger, she, in her life, in her *Letters Home* and her writings from *The Journals* to *Ariel*, seems to ask: Has anyone ever made the ontological origin of notness on the basis of which the problem of the not and its notness and the possibility of this notness, is raised?

She raises this basic question: What is the lack which troubled her own life? Of course, she could not specify the objects of her fear, but her poetry and her life do suggest by pointing to the direction herself. To what Being itself, what Man, *Das Man* in German is what Heidegger calls *Dasein*. This question was never raised earlier, though poets have done it from the earliest times. Plath thus brings poetry and philosophy together to ask what is existent? For Plath there is no essence of man; he is only being there, one among others, thrown amidst in the world, in a family, a community. His fears arise from his thrownness in a contingent world. He expresses only existence. It is not given. It is possibility which Plath achieves dimly in rarer moments, ever fearing the cold touch of truth of her possibility, i.e. her finitude, her death. Nowhere does she choose herself, the truth of existence. Her being therefore remains indeterminate. If her life asserts truth, her poetry crosses with the dialectic of 'not' and vice-versa.

Human existence, as Heidegger said, is a being-in-the-world; the self is in relation to other persons. The very structure, as the structuralists thought, is constituted by this relationship with others and with the world. There is no escape from this social involvement, arbitrary though. But to escape this involvement and indeed authentic involvement would destroy authentic existence, as she did, and thereby her choice, her possibility and her responsibility.

As studied in details her concern for time, the present researcher once again feels the lack (notness) as all dialectical thinking implies, Plath misses in her life and poetry the existential view of time. Indeed this conception of time in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, as the title of his *magnum opus* suggests, is that Being and Time are one. Being does not live by clock-time. Clock-time is quantitative time, objectively and scientifically measured -- endless passing irreversible succession of discrete 'now'.

“Nows” are conceptualized as on-hand entity, a thing or life itself. But the latter is distinct from the former, for it cannot be measured by “now”; time in life is subjective. Death can come any time. Indeed, one is ripe always for death. Being and nothing are one in Hegel; failing to realize this keeps Plath always in panic. Her poetry, however, beguiles her life by offering assurances beyond the grave. In failing to bear the anxiety of her mortality, she thought of dying many a time. Hers is an existential world, threatening, though obscure. In *The Journals* (July 19, 1958) she said that her worst habit was her fear and her destructive rationalizing. This forms her dialectic.

Plath uses the dialectic of notness; she calls it the illusion not of Greek necessity, not Christian resurrection, and immortality. Thus what life reveals is denied. She keeps hidden her temporality that she lives in time, in history. This she does without any conviction in religion. Her poetry is not confessional in revealing truth, but in hiding it from herself. Nevertheless, the real nature of human existence is revealed in one’s temporality. Not only Christians, even the Greeks failed in this regard -- to underline the role of time other than a sequent of presents, “nows”. But man is, Plath suggests even while ignoring it, that man is not simply his present. But he is his past and his future. He is forever oriented to his future, to his possibilities. Unfortunately, the first entry in *The Journals* says that the present is forever, shifting, melting, of course, in the future.

The present thesis lays emphasis not on what she has been and about whom so much is made of, almost a euphoria, particularly after her suicide, but on what she might not have been; she is not merely a Smith girl, a woman with two children whose husband deserted her, but more interpretatively, more hermeneutically she laid bare in her life and poetry how the whole truth cannot possibly be revealed whatever our claim to be confessional. Plath’s oft-celebrated poem “Daddy” is an ordinary response of the next generation which seeks its existence, of course, inauthentic, by disowning past, rather than realizing its possibilities, that its next generation would do the same as they have done with its past generation.

FINDINGS

The reading of the collections of Plath’s poetry in relation to her life nonetheless arouses us from the inauthentic existence. After all, what did Plath gain in remaining in dread? But if she did not, her readers do achieve an awareness of their authentic existence, that one is temporal and must die one day or the other. So why must one remain in anxiety, in anguish and in dread of what is inevitable, unlocalized and ultimate? One’s being-in-the-world and our commonality, our unheroic attitude produces dread. It is none different with Plath. When her experience is fresh she says that what she was afraid of was actually “nothing” – produces a complex of poetry which created a dialectic of suspense between inauthentic impersonal existence and genuine existence of self-determinant, more of former than of the latter. Life is, thus, as Plath attempts to show by hiding the whole truth of it, cast between nothing and nothing. Death is its limit. We must accept it freely and acknowledge it. There is no substitute for it and into it one must go alone. To harbour any illusion regarding it is to live meaninglessly, without genuine existence and dignity.

CONCLUSION

Plath, then, is able to see life objectively, marking the success of her poetry. She gets over her dread. In the lucid vision while yet the experience is fresh, had she asked, as Heidegger does, what she was afraid of, she would have said, she was afraid of nothing.