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Autobiographical Literature As It Is Incarnated In Sylvia Plath's Poetry

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Abstract

This paper investigates how Sylvia Plath's style of writing is completely autobiographical which reflects her life, suffering and her psychology. Autobiographical literature, in its broader sense, is a style of writing that synonymously resembles with "life writing" which signifies all styles and genres of telling the personal life of someone. Precisely, autobiography as a genre of literature denotes a kind of narrative that tells the author's own life, or a significant part of it, in order to recreate the development of his/her personality within a given historical, social, and cultural framework. The poetry of Plath is totally autobiographical because she narrates the psychological problems faced by her. Most of the personal problems she discusses in her work are modern problems faced by many people in the world like anxiety, isolation, lack of self-realization, hopelessness, lack of communication and uncertainty.

Keywords: Autobiography, autobiographical writings, confessional poetry, Sylvia Plath, biography.

Introduction

Autobiography is considered to be a fascinating and unique style of writing that preserves its value in the history of literature as a first person narrative. It provides a specific identity of the writer own self in the literary writings. Autobiographical narratives are by nature subjective. However, the power of personality and subjectivity of the author are inseparable in an autobiography. Autobiographical literature explains the way in which the individuals define themselves and understand their own experiences. The pillars of reasons in autobiographical subjectivity are memory, experience and identity. The author of an

autobiography reflects the scattered elements of his individual self and reforms them in a comprehensive sketch. The author exists both within and beyond historical time and social space (Jayaannapura, 2017)

The word autobiography literally means auto (self), bio (life), graph (writing). In brief, autobiographical literature is the recitation of someone's life either narrated by himself or being told by somebody else. The first one who uses the word "autobiography" was William Taylor in 1797 in the English periodical "The Monthly Review". He gives it a negative sense and considered it as "pedantic" (Mirza, 2020).

Autobiographical literature takes its current sense by the Romantic poet Robert Southey in 1809. However, it is always used as a mode of self-expression since the ancient times. Such works were called "apologia" in antiquity, whose main purpose was to write about someone's life as a kind of either a model or to give justification of some kind about one's actions and life. There was no intention of giving a record of any kind of self-documentation. Autobiographical literature takes many forms, from a formal book-length to the intimate writings that are narrated during life and are not specifically intended for publication "including letters, diaries, journals, memoirs, and reminiscences" (Mirza, 2020, p.1).

Human beings, from the earliest times of civilization, have the desire to express themselves and reveal their feelings to someone. They always try to express their internal feelings, passions and ambitions through the medium of art. One of these mediums is through autobiographical literature which comes in two forms; oral and written. There are different names for the term autobiography in literature: "life narratives which is written by the author himself, diary, memoirs, journal, biography by self, and history by self also, etc. Autobiography, since the twenties, is used as a 'self-expression". Autobiographical author is concerned with narrating his own history which makes him recollecting the dispersed incidents of his life and presents them in a comprehensive artistic sketch (Sinha, 2014,p.4).

According to Dilthey (1989), autobiography is the best possible revelation of life, a hermeneutic situation in which understanding takes place. According to Dilthey (1989) describes the autobiographical literature as a self-evidence of the writer which poses a proposition to understand the historical side of life and this what makes it as worth serious research. Therefore, it should be regarded as the expression of the individual's spiritual state as well as the writer's contemporaneous personalities. Despite this fact, autobiography as self-biography is not considered to be an accepted reliable historical source (Harmon, 2014).

Lubas-Bartoszyńska (1993) warns that the term autobiography may be used in the wrong way. As an example, in some cases of understanding they consider the Bible as God's autobiography, which, of course, cannot be taken seriously. On the other hand, we have "biographism" which means reading a literary work through facts that are presented from the life of the author as a real person. Sometimes, the scholars try hard to find out parallels between the world shown in a literary work and the real experience of the writer. Consequently, the prototypes of characters, landscapes, and events are described – which shapes the borders between fiction and reality, the real world and creation, and finally between fictional work and autobiography (Harmon,2014).

Autobiographies have many functions and the most important one is that of history which means that you are able to read the person's own ideas, feelings, events and life stories. In journalism, the reporter goes to the source to get an accurate and detailed account of an event. The same happens with the life stories because reading the story from a second or third person will not be as reliable as reading it from the first person. The narrator may explain the events of the person's life incorrectly. Another function of the autobiographical literature is the feelings that it gives to other people who live in similar

circumstances and make them realize that they are not alone. They can give inspiration to those who are facing problems and difficulties in their lives. On the other hand, it is of great benefit for the author because the autobiography allows them to heal their feelings and opinions. Many writers find writing their own stories as a therapeutic, healing and helping them beyond what any counseling may do or as a part of the counseling. Autobiography is very important at history because it allows people to know about the life of each other from the past and the present, keeping history alive. In the future, people can know a lot about our present culture by reading autobiographies by people of today (Sinha, 2014).

There are four broad types of autobiography: thematic, intellectual, fictionalized and religious. The first type includes books with such different purposes as “The Americanization of Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*” (1925- 1927) and “Edward Bok” (1920). On the other hand, religious autobiography which includes sum of great works, ranging from “Augustine and Kempfe” to the autobiographical chapters of “Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* and John Henry Cardinal Newman’s *Apologia* in the 19th century”. In that specific century and also the early twentieths observes the creation of many intellectual autobiographies, including “the analytical autobiography of the philosopher John Stuart Mill and *The Education of Henry Adams*”. Finally, another term which is somewhat equivalent to biography is the autobiography. This group includes such works as “Samuel Butler’s *The Way of All Flesh* (1903), James Joyce’s “*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*” (1916), George Santayana’s “*The Last Puritan*” (1935), and the novels of Thomas Wolfe”. Yet in all of these works can be detected elements of all four types of autobiography. (Sinha, 2014)

This research focuses mainly on the early American autobiography as it is incarnated by Sylvia Plath’s works. Autobiographical works in early America show us how individuals imagined themselves and lived within and among evolving culture and a challenging environment. Although the emphasis on the personal perspective, autobiography and the American literature would seem closely aligned together because they both celebrate and value the self. This genre involves the study of the conditions for using the first person voice to express issues such as spiritual, secular, the sources for early American autobiography and the general composition of an autobiographical text. Early American autobiography is developing at the intersection of cultural, geographic, political, and religious change that estimate the individual accomplishments yet prefers to express it with modesty. Such texts range across gender, class, ethnicity, and doctrine to anchor our historical understanding of rebellion, migration, settlement, and nation building with valuable perception (Imbarrato, 2008).

Sylvia Plath was an American poet and novelist. She was born in Boston, Massachusetts on 27 of October, 1932 to extremely intelligent parents. When Sylvia was eight, she published her first poem. At the same year, 1940, her father died and his death has a deep impact on her. Sylvia continued to publish poetry and fiction throughout her childhood and adolescence. She published some works in local magazines and newspapers and her first national work was published in the “*Christian Science Monitor*” in 1950. Plath met the British poet Ted Hughes and they got married although the two later split. Her depression made her committed suicide for the first time in 1963 after writing her novel *The Bell Jar*. They sent her to a private psychiatric hospital for six months (Kukil, 2000).

From her writings, Plath has suffered the hardest destiny that may happen to any artist: the incidents of her life have covered her literary work. Many authors have explain her life story with horrific interest, some of the authors try to diagnose the mental illness that she suffers from. Such insistence on the mental health of Sylvia and on her mental pathological defects which were the main reason behind her poetry, is consider as a unique literary criticism (Asotic, 2015).

There are different reasons behind the “biographical fallacy” in her works, one of them is the general disposition that views the poem as an expression of the personal life of the poet. As a result of the literary revolution, poetry was construed in its relation to two components of the creative process: the recipient and the referent (Abrams, 1971).

Sylvia’s work is described as “confessional” which is another reason behind her biographical (mis)reading. Confessional poetry was a style of writing innated in mid-twentieth century in America. A confessional poem does not depend only on its subject matter – e.g., sex, family, madness, alcoholism, or the emphasis on self, but also on the directness with which such things are tackled (Yezzi, 1998).

Plath’s poetry is evenly political. It deals with those feminist aspects of the domestic experience which have been methodically excluded and ignored from public discourse. Plath transforms the terms of her incarceration by bringing them into a innovative process where she can transcend and manipulate them. Plath tries to hide the personal “I”, or at least move away from it where it is possible (Steiner, 1965).

Three of her literary works are literally autobiographical: “Ariel”, “Daddy” and “The Bell Jar”. Her poem “Daddy” is considered one of the most controversial poems ever written in modern poetry. Her poems have dark, strange, and painful allegory. She uses metaphor and many other literary devices to express the idea of a victimized female that finally freeing herself from her father. She wrote "Daddy" on October 12th 1962, a month after her separation from her husband. After four months, her father was dead. In spite that, Sylvia wrote some of her best literary works during that tempestuous period. Sylvia tries to combine the mythical with the personal in her poem "Daddy" (Spacey, 2015).

“Daddy” reveals Plath’s pain and terror expressively and evocatively. The father is shown as a “black shoe, a Nazi, a bag full of God, a cold marble statue, a fascist, a sadistic brute, a swastika, and a vampire”. Sylvia is obsessed by her idolization of this man.

In these lines “Daddy, I have had to kill you. You died before I had time...” she says that the only way to release herself by killing her "daddy," who considerably looks like her actual father, Otto, who left her when she was eight.

The most personal lines in this poem when she says:

**“Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die”**

Sylvia knows that this is the man who tore her apart, left her split, and broken. After her father’s death, Sylvia fills up with rage against God. When she becomes twenty, Plath has committed suicide for the first time.

In stanza 15, the poem shows how the narrator has accomplished her dual killing, both of husband and father. She describes her husband as a “vampire” who has been sucking her blood for about seven years. Sylvia uses many poetic devices like simile, metaphor, alliteration, and assonance. "Daddy" is a typical poem of confessional poetry, which is so autobiographical and emotional in nature. The poem includes a lot of allusion and surreal images interspersed with incidents from the Sylvia’s childhood and a type of dark photographic language that borrows from nursery rhyme and song lyric (Spacey, 2015).

Another poem by Plath is “Ariel” which is extremely autobiographical, confessional and psychological poem. This poem is considered to be the most ambiguous and complex poem of Plath. Ariel has different meanings and explanations and the most important meaning is the name given by Biblical Hebrew. In this sense it means “lion of God”. “Ariel” may also stand for her horse. Most

importantly, this poem can be included in the confessional poems because it is highly autobiographical. The poet talks about the horse she used to ride in her teenage life. It talks about unity between the rider and horse. When Plath rides it, she goes to a mysterious world. The depth of the imagery she uses in the poem is very much clear and worthy. Plath is actually referring to her journey towards death. When she talks about her journey towards the world of mystery, Plath is talking about psychological difficulties, which she has faced during her whole life, therefore, she wishes a peaceful journey which may lead her towards death because she thinks that afterlife is the only peaceful place for a human being who is suffering mentally in this world. This poem also refers to the gloomy and sad view that the poet has towards life. The theme of loneliness controls the poem. Plath suffers from loneliness which increases her hatred towards her husband and father. Sylvia's father left her alone in this cruel world when she was only eight and her husband who firstly gives her hope of new life but then subsequently put her mind in a complex situation (Ahmed, 2018).

**“The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red
Eye, the cauldron of morning”**

In these lines, she expresses a conventional death wish, her desire for extinction. Ariel is considered as one of her most obscure poems. The strong feelings and deep sensations which the poem contains are, as it were, glaciated due to the extreme compression (Roy, 2020)

The last autobiographical literary work of Sylvia is her novel “The Bell Jar”. It is her first and only published novel. It is the famous one, with strong autobiographical elements. This novel is influential, controversial, and culturally relevant. It expresses Plath's life incidents like breakdown; her suicide attempts, her hospitalizations; and also her retrieval and return to university. Throughout all these incidents, she suffers and fights with the cultural conventions of the 1950s. Plath called this literary work an “autobiographical apprentice work.” She lightly constructed this novel on her twentieth years. This novel is considered to be the final phase of Plath's literary career. A few weeks after the publication of “The Bell Jar”, Sylvia committed suicide and ended her life with tragic death (Bennett, 1986).

**“Writer,” I said.
“Housewife,” she said.
“Writer,” I said.
“I'll just put down housewife,” she said.**

Plath's “The Bell Jar” is “a book written about growing up as a woman in a culture that is fundamentally unfair and hypocritical in its inequality” (P.103). The image of the Bell Jar stands as a rich portrayal of a woman's struggle within these societies and her attempts to control and manage her life. Women, in the 1950s, had very few choices in concern to the traces of their lives. Women's choice between a career and motherhood is at the heart of the Esther's struggle, and the society's preferable choice is motherhood (Bennett, 1986). “The Bell Jar” contains a lot of instances of women who are paying for their unfeminine sexuality, appetites, and vomiting is used as a symbol for both disgust and attraction. The Bell Jar remains one of the powerful and inventive text enthusiastically read by diversity of audiences (Showalter, 2009).

Conclusion

Autobiographical literature is a type of writing in which the incidents are the author's real life. It talks about the experiences and events that the author has lived. It can be fictional or partly fictional, at the same time it doesn't have to give us completely real pictures of the life of the author. Sometimes in order to interpret autobiographical works, we need to know about the real life of the writer and the circumstances and experiences that he has faced during his life and as a result has influenced his or her writings. It is sometimes referred to as "life writing" because it mirrors the life of the writer. It is always assumed that the poetry of Sylvia Plath is autobiographical. In most of her literary works, she deals with psychological problems faced by her and by most people at that time. We can say that her problems are universal. Most of these problems are about isolation, anxiety, hopelessness, insecurity, uncertainty etc.

Every poem and even her single novel of Sylvia ends with hopelessness and death is her favourite theme. Because of her hard life and experiences, she freely uses the theme of death in her poems and novel. For this reason, Plath's poetry is totally autobiographical. Sylvia's poetry is considered as a type of impervious isolation and silence before publishing it to the world in a fury of language that will not assign any reader and consider no confessor. Plath's poetry is filled with imaginative pictures. She tries to free herself from all the pains and troubles to the other world. Throughout the poems, she reveals her own personality. Plath was one of the most complex American poet and even her literary works cannot describe her complete personality. Plath writes three literary works which are totally autobiographical: "Ariel", "Daddy" and "The Bell Jar". The critics describe her writings as "mere confession" because she confesses and explains her psychological problems clearly in her poems and in her last novel. There are some issues that are apparent in her writings such as her issues with the male race in general throughout her life. Sylvia was a victim of circumstances because of the special type of men that she encountered in her life, her husband and her father. She tries to solve such social problems concerning women and their oppression by writing about her own life and giving an image of the victimized woman.

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