

Patriarchal Suppression through the Images of Holocaust¹ in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath**Literature****Keywords:** Holocaust, Jew, Nazi, victim, male suppression.**Arjete Luani (Rripa)****University of Shkoder "Luigj Gurakuqi" Faculty of Foreign Languages.****Abstract**

The aim of this article is to give the degree of patriarchal suppression by comparing it to Holocaust, one of the most traumatic episodes by comparing it to Holocaust, in which she is a Jew and her father and husband a Nazi. Why did Plath choose Holocaust to show her psychological suppression? Was it fair to have such comparison? It is the psychological approach that explains this: projection and transference. This means that Plath identifies herself with the victims of Holocaust, the Jews, which was very common for the Jews who underwent the tortures of the Nazi, and, at the same time, she passes her identity and that of her father and husband while she makes the comparison. These images prevail in Plath's two most powerful poems: "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus". Plath began writing for Holocaust after April 1962, the year in which she broke her poetic silence and got revolted against the psychological isolation caused by the death of her father and by her broken relationship with her husband, Ted Hughes. The challenge against the male authority goes to the edges when she is resurrected, after she becomes ash.

Introduction

The aim of this study is to give an insight into one of the most delicate issues of all the times: female suppression in a patriarchal society. The most interesting aspect of this insight is that it is given through the images of Holocaust in order to highlight the degree of the suppression.

The patriarchal suppression in Plath's work is abundant and it is given through different images. One of the images that had a huge impact was that of the Holocaust. Plath started using this image during the last year of her life, from April 1962, and it culminated by the end of this year, which was also the year in which she got divorced from her husband.

Plath lived in the era of victimhood and was a victim of modern life in the same way as the other women. She lived in the era of great historical events and changes. The World War II, the Cold War, and McCarthyism² had a great impact on people's lives. In America, one of the big changes, after the war, was the move towards the suburbs.

The sociologists stressed the fact that those women who lived in the suburbs were more educated than the ones in the city; nevertheless, they were full-time housewives. The main reasons for this move was for children's sake, as the suburbs offered more space to them. As a result, the picture of the American family after the World War II showed women encapsulated in their houses dealing with house chores and children. There was no difference between the educated and

¹ At the beginning Holocaust was used for the nuclear threat in 1949 and then for the Jews in Germany. However, some critics suggest that it is a term inspired by the deities because it means sacrifice in the Bible. Sylvia Plath uses this term with the same meaning in her poetic work *Ariel*. Its meaning is also Jerusalem or altar, but Sylvia uses the term *Ariel* as the the altar of Holocaust. The etymology of this word will be given in "Mary's Song" as a religious animal sacrifice that is completely burnt by fire.

² McCarthyism is the practice of making accusations of subversion or treason without proper regard for evidence.

non-educated women when the issue was about family creation. A woman had to be either at home or at work; she could not handle both of them. Most of them had a passive public life.

It was exactly because of this situation that women experienced different personality disorders. They did not recognize themselves and were in search of their identity, as their lives were under their husbands' control. A woman's ambition was only that of having five children and living in a beautiful house; being a perfect mother and wife was everything they could dream of. However, it was this role that brought personality disorders that were even reflected in the poetry of that time by women writers. Freeman states that it was because of this couple inequality that women "suffer far greater mental health hazards and present a far worse clinical picture than married man. (...) Some have suggested that it may be due to characteristics of the female role, particularly the married woman's role as housewife." (Freeman, 1999, pp. 143-144).

Plath was among those woman that had the same status in society and underwent the same experiences as the other women; although, she had decided to adopt that role by herself as she could not do otherwise. She was concious that her role as a wife and mother was not an option, but a must.

Betty Friedan brought a new attitude towards this aspect in her work "The Feminine Mystique", in which she condemns this situation. "Women are human beings, not stuffed dolls, not animals. (...) education for women has become so suspect that more and more drop out of high school and college to marry and have babies; (...) women so insistly confine themselves to one role." (Friedan, 1963, pp. 60-61). According to her, "The feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity. (...) But the new image this mystique gives to American women is the old image: "Occupation: housewife." (Friedan, 1963, p. 37).

Friedan was in the role of the reporter and went from one suburb to the other to see herself the image of the real woman. Their only occupation was dealing with everything that had to do with the house and child rearing, but more than the half of them visited the psychiatrist; some of them had tried to commit suicide, and the others had dealt with depression. Friedan argues that the main reason for this situation was the emptiness of the housewife role. All the decisions were taken by their husbands or fathers and the woman felt the need to fight for their own rights. They had to show to the masculine society that they were not just house ornaments or dolls to play with; they had to show that they existed and and that they had their own voice.

"Feminist Movement" was a revolt against identity negation. Women started searching for their identity, as gender equality was necessary to liberate not only the women, but also the men. "For the degradation of woman also degraded marriage, love, all relations between man and woman." (Friedan, 1963, p. 78). This was a phenomenon that was also known as "The Second Revolution in America". It was a revolution that touched the consciousness as well. It was this

feminist movement that came as a reaction towards the isolating conditions in which the women found themselves and which helped in changing a lot of things.

Materials and Methods

The comparative approach is one of the methods used to highlight the patriarchal suppression through the comparison of the Nazi to the aggressors/males and the comparison of the victims of Holocaust/Jews to the victims of the patriarchal suppression. As a main source there are used the original works of the poet Sylvia Plath, but also the ones with a biographical character, and critical ones as well.

Results

“Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” are the most well-known poems of Plath’s poetry. Both these poems are astonishing; they trouble the consciousness and the mind because of the topic and the powerful images that are used. Both these poems have to do with masculinity and the challenge of the male authority. As a result, Plath treats the patriarchal suppression with a very challenging tone. It is a revolt that goes to edges, to sacrifice. This male authority is transformed in Nazi or German and the sufferer in a Jew.

“Daddy”, which is also considered as the ‘Guernica’ of modern poetry, is one of the most powerful poems of Plath. “Daddy” was one of the alternatives for the title of *Ariel*. This is a poem about father-daughter relationship that is compared with that of Nazi-Jew. It is a comparison that passes the boundaries of what we call a normal one, but it is this aspect that makes this poem a masterpiece. In order to justify the identification of her father with a German, who is also a Nazi, Plath uses his German origin in this poem and at the same time describes the consequences of the war:

Ach, du.³

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend
(...)
I could hardly talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich.

³ Translated from German, it means “Ah, you”

I could hardly speak. (Plath, 2004, p. 74)

In addition, Plath underlines the fact that the German language has started to vanish in her; it has become “useless” and the communication with her father is getting harder and harder, because he does not exist anymore. According to Jacqueline Rose, this is a very important aspect:

Twice over, the origins of the father, physically and in language, are lost (...) Wars wipe out names, the father cannot be spoken to, and the child cannot talk, except to repeat endlessly, in a destroyed obscene language, the most basic or minimal unit of self-identity in speech: ‘ich, ich, ich, ich’. (Rose, 1992, p. 226).

Furthermore, the use of the minimal units of speech such as “I” and its repetition shows the fact that her father was a rigid person, like a Nazi; consequently, the speaker / Plath did not express her emotions so easily, because she was scared of him. Plath explains this fact in the proceeding lines of the poem. Otto Plath had a German origin and was such even in his character; as a result, Plath identifies him with a Nazi and she becomes a Jew:

I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew. (Plath, 2004, p. 75)

Plath, proceeds by identifying her father with Adolf Hitler, the most authoritarian and powerful German figure that led Germany, the Nazi Party, and the Auschwitz atrocity: “I have always been scared of *you*, / With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygo.” (Plath, 2004, p. 75). “Luftwaffe” stands for the German air force during the World War II, which was created on 26 February, 1935 by Hitler. It was also the official name for the Nazi air force and it is similar to the rules created by Otto Plath himself.

He had created his own “canon” at home by imposing his own word on everything and everybody had to respect that: “Otto insisted on handling all finances (...) Despite the fact that he was only sixteen when he arrived in the United States, the Germanic theory that the man should be *der Herr des Houses* (head of the house) persisted (...)”, states Aurelia Plath about her husband Otto. (Plath, 1992b, p. 13). Moreover, he was similar to Hitler even in appearance, besides the character:

And your neat moustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.

Panzer-man, panzer-man, o You.

Not God but a swastika

So black no sky could squeak through.

(...)

A man in black with a Meinkampf look. (Plath, 2004, pp. 75-76)

“Meinkampf”, which meaning is “My war”, is an autobiographical book written by Hitler in 1925 when he was in prison. It has to do with the political and ideological plans of Hilter about Germany.

What is noticed in this poem is the relation between Plath’s father and the black color, which symbolizes evil, wickedness, death, sorrow, destruction, coldness, and ferocity; this is to reinforce even more his negative consequences on her daughter and to describe even better the mental prison that he created for her after his death.

The portrait of the father that she has in the painting is transformed symbolically in “A man in black with a Meinkampf look.” (Plath, 2004, p. 76), who is also a swastika that is “So black no sky could squeak through.” (Plath, 2004, p. 75). Even the phone through which the speaker tries to communicate with him is black. The speaker mostly describes her father as a black person, dressed in black and with a black heart.

Nevertheless, after this image, through which Plath states her hatred towards her father, an astonishing statement comes: “Every woman adores a Fascist / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you.” (Plath, 2004, p. 75) Actually this is a paradoxical statement. This confirms once again the relationship victim / aggressor and the identification with the victim and the usurpation of a supposed identity. Psychologically the people who are violated might well fall in love with the aggressor, although they are victims. In case of Plath, she actually suffered from the *Electra* complex. She even declares this fondness towards her father while she read “Daddy” for BBC. She confessed that the poem was written by a girl with the *Electra* complex. Therefore, she feels quite well being in the position of the victim. The same feeling of love is expressed through these lines:

I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do. (Plath, 2004, p. 76)

Through these lines it is again stated the love for the aggressor or for such a German. This is love, although it is suppressing. In using the images of the Jews and the Nazi to show her

relationship with her father, Plath highlights the isolation or the psychological suppression that was formed by the death of her father. Her father died prematurely when she was only eight years old. His death had caused her a trauma from which she could not recuperate herself until she killed herself. This is also given in the poem:

(...) the black man who
Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you. . (Plath, 2004, p. 76)

Another poem in which the images of Holocaust are powerfully given is “Lady Lazarus”. In this poem the image of Holocaust is raised to another level: religion, myth, and history are one. As the title suggests, this poem has to do with the biblical figure Lazarus who was raised from death by Jesus. In this poem Lazarus and the Jews have become one:

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify? -----

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day. (Plath, 2004, p. 14)

The destiny of these deteriorated features is death and the grave: “Soon, soon the flesh / The grave cave ate will be / At home on me” (Plath, 2004, p. 14). Although they are in this miserable state, Lazarus and the Jews want the audience to pay for this performance. They want the audience to pay for those parts of the body that they see; they want them to pay for this miracle.⁴ Plath was in the same condition; she was “a walking miracle”, too. She tried three times to kill herself and in the last trial she succeeded:

⁴ The fact that one has to pay to see their bodies is actually true. In Auschwitz there is a museum in which there are demonstrated all the remainings of the Jews from the concentration camps.

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like a cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash to annihilate each decade.
(...)
Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman
The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.

The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

As a seashell.
They had to call and call (Plath, 2004, pp. 14-15)

Plath is an object of an audience who comes to see her in the hospital after the failure in committing suicide; to see Lazarus, object of a miracle; and to see the remainings of the Jews in the museums after the end of the war. This a show for the audience in all the cases:

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot----
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone.
(...)
It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:
'A miracle!' (Plath, 2004, pp. 15-16)

This “strip tease” reminds us of Lazarus who was wrapped with bandages, as he had been prepared to be buried and after being resurrected they were removed. However, the audience has to pay for this performance, as it is a sacrifice. The sacrifice must be paid. The audience has to pay for their visits to the museums where the belongings of the Jews are exhibited.

There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge

For the hearing of my heart

(...)

And there is a charge, a very large charge

For a word or a touch

Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.

So, so Herr Doctor.

So, Herr Enemy. (Plath, 2004, p. 16)

Her enemy is her dead father, is her ex-husband, and the “Doctor”, the one who might have diagnosed her with neurosis, or the doctor who brought her to life after she failed committing suicide. Now she is on the hands of this “enemy” and does not have the strength anymore to fight the one that brought her to this point: “I am your opus, / I am your valuable,” (Plath, 2004, p. 16). The result of being prone to the enemies, to the Nazi, is torture, is the death:

The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.

I turn and burn

(...)

Ash, ash-----

You poke and stir.

Flesh, bone, there is nothing there----- (Plath, 2004, pp. 16-17)

She was deceived, just like a Jew, by “a cake of soap” that was given to them to enter the shower in which they found the death. She is also deceived by “a wedding ring” because she believed in her marriage.

All these images reveal the speaker’s place in the patriarchal society. She feels like a Jew and experiences almost the same story. Nevertheless, she is suppressed psychologically by the male dominated life that has transformed her into an unknown person, into a person without identity as she becomes ash.

Another poem in which the Holocaust images are present is “Little Fugue”. This is again another poem in which the main character is her father and there are again angry tones towards him. This can perfectly be compared with “Daddy” regarding the comparison that Plath makes between him and the Germans, between her and the Jews:

I see your voice
Black and leafy, as in my childhood,

A yew hedge of orders,
Gothic and barbarous, pure German.
Dead men cry from it. (Plath, 1992a, p. 188)

Discussion

Why did Sylvia choose the image of Holocaust to represent the patriarchal suppression? Was it fair to use it? Many critics are divided towards this aspect. They think that the image is inappropriate because she cannot compare what her father or husband did to her with what the Nazi did to the Jews. She cannot victimize herself to the point that she can be compared to the Jews. Moreover, only those who have experienced Holocaust can speak of it without using the metaphor. Jacqueline Rose, in her book *The Hunting of Sylvia Plath*, argues that: “In all these criticisms, the key concept appears to be the metaphor—either Plath trivialises the Holocaust through that essentially personal (it is argued) reference, or she aggrandizes her experience by stealing the historical event.” (Rose, 1992, p. 206). Whereas Tim Kendall in his book *Sylvia Plath A Critical Study* would argue that: “Plath’s speakers aspire to Jewishness. Yet they remain unconcerned by the tenets of the religion, and not interested at all in questions of dogma.” (Kendall, 2001, p. 122).

However, there are also other critics who agree on this comparison. “George Steiner honors Plath for her “act of identification, of total communion with those tortured and massacred.”” (Malcom, 2005, p. 64). I would argue that poetry can contain everything, including even the biggest and the most painful truths of Holocaust. Plath neither minimizes Holocaust, nor aggrandizes her bitter experience. The metaphor that she uses must be considered as a means to realize and live with the atrocities of Auschwitz, with the psychic drama of Plath and of every woman that is going through the same range of sufferings as the Jews did. Through the Holocaust images, Plath shows to us that she was very victimized by the modern life, just like the Jews were by the events that took place during the World War II.

However, the question is not if she has the right or not, but the reason of using Holocaust in her poems. If we consider her origin, we can find a relation between her and Germany, the place where this atrocity took place. Her father, Otto, was born in Grabow (The Polish Corridor) and her grandparents were German. Whereas Aurelia, her mother, was of Austrian origin, but was very

related to the German language. Both her parents spoke German at home, as Aurelia had Master of Arts in German and taught German in the high school.

Besides this, Plath highlights the fact that she is fond of the German language and that she tries to learn German, although her attempts fail. This desire and failure is given in the letters that she wrote to her mother *Letters Home*. In those letters she also gives the motives that led her to learning the German language: “I suppose as one grows older one has a desire to learn all about one’s roots, family, and country. I feel extremely moved by the memories of my Austrian and German background and also my ocean-childhood, which is probably the foundation of my consciousness” (Plath, 1992b, p. 346). Plath claims that she has German and Austrian roots and accepts the fact that they have moulded her character and even her consciousness.

In relation to the German language and the failure to communicate with her father in this language is given in “Daddy”, the poem that is dedicated to her father and to his German roots, for example: “Ach, du / In the German tongue, in the Polish town” or “Ich, Ich, Ich, Ich. / I could hardly speak. / I thought every German was you.” (Plath, 2004, pp. 74-75). The language has become so ‘obscene’ that is hardly spoken and its roots are lost as well. Jacqueline Rose considers this as an important aspect:

The origins of the father, physically and in language, are lost-through wars (...). Wars wipe out names, the father cannot be spoken, and the child cannot talk, except to repeat endlessly, in a destroyed obscene language the most basic unit or minimal unit of self-identity in speech: ‘Ich, ich, ich, ich.’ (Rose, 1992, p. 226).

Taking into consideration the period in which Plath lived and wrote poetry, I would argue that it had a great impact on everybody and especially on her and this is transmitted even in her poetry by making a connection between the private and the public. Plath was very concerned about the post-war situation and every now and then she wrote to her mother about the effects of these wars on her and the fact that she experienced those events as if she was there. She feels the same in relation to Holocaust, one of the most powerful atrocities that happened during the twentieth century and which influenced people’s minds. Moreover, according to Rosenthal, “Sometimes Sylvia Plath could not distinguish between herself and the facts of, say, Auschwitz or Hiroshima. She was victim, killer, and the place and process of horror all at once.” (Rosenthal, 1991, p. 199).

In Plath's academic life, the influence of which is neglected at cost by many critics and biographers, the Holocaust was a topic in both high school and college. A schoolmate recalls how Plath's history teacher at Wellesley High School, Raymond Chapman, confronted his class with this topic and gave the shudders to his students. Both Chapman's desire to disturb his students' complacency and the strategy he used foreshadow Plath's similar treatment of the Holocaust in her later poetry. Plath's college professors encouraged the reasoned linking of Nazism with current

political concerns. With the Cold War at its height in the late 1950s, the potential for a different, nuclear genocide made concerns about the Holocaust immediately relevant.

Her awareness of the interconnection between the private and the political in her interest in the Holocaust is evident in a BBC radio interview she gave in 1962. When asked why she treats the Holocaust in her poetry, she declares: “In particular, my background is, may I say, German and Austrian. . . . and so my concern with concentration camps and so on is uniquely intense. And then, again, I'm rather a political person as well, so I suppose that's what part of it comes from.” (Orr, 1966, p. 169).

However, how can Plath speak of Holocaust as if she was a victim when she had never been such? We can explain this by using two psychological phenomena. *Projection* is a psychological phenomenon that means the identification with the victim, in this case with the Jews: “The total innocence of the Jew, for the one who is not Jewish, turns into a form of guilt. According to the strictest logic of projection, the Jew becomes culpable for the fact that she cannot be blamed.” (Rose, 1992, p. 218). The patients who had experienced the tortures of Auschwitz lived with illusions, by imposing themselves in the role of the victim and in that of the aggressor. This would mean that Plath had been a real victim of her father as much as the Jews were victims of the Nazi. She might have experienced a psychological trauma and lives with illusions as if she was really experiencing the same tortures, although she was never prone to a physical violation.

Besides projection, another psychological phenomenon that would explain Plath's use of Holocaust is *transference*, which means the passing of identities to another object. Sylvia turns every German into the image of her father. This phenomenon of transference is noticed in most of Plath's poems starting from her first poetic work *The Colossus and the Other Poems* to her most famous work *Ariel*. If in the first work the transference was just a matter of comparison to show the character's deterioration, for example in “Poems for a Birthday”; in her second poetic work *Ariel*, this transference is raised to the highest level. In *Ariel*, transference has to do with transformations that have to be done in order to reach the liberation from isolation and to reach what is called *transcendence*.

In conclusion, the use of Holocaust image serves the most important aspect of suppression: a suppression that happens everywhere and every time. Jews and Holocaust will forever be reminded as one of the most painful suppressions of all the time. Jews have always existed; there will always be people who go to the edge of death and return to life. In the same way, there will always be a patriarchal suppression with its victims, but without witnesses. There will always be women that will survive their holocaust of life because of the patriarchal suppression, which has adjusted itself perfectly either in traditional or modern societies of nowadays.

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