



Asserting Female Identity: A Comparative Study of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath

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Abstract

The question of whether there is anything new to be contributed from a comparative study of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath which has been researched over and over again seems to arise at the back of researchers' minds. However, it is true that no authentic piece of work is a finished product as much as every discovery is a life-long process.

Dickinson and Sylvia Plath were the two most prominent women writers of the 19th and 20th centuries. They lived in two different eras but they stood for a similar cause both empowered to fight for women's dignity, liberation, and gender equality in a male dominant conventional stereotype society. Being potential intellectuals, they were not just satisfied with domestic housewife duties imposed on them by the patriarchal world. They fought to bring out their womanhood, their true self in a way they could, by writing on behalf of the oppressed rest for which they are considered cornerstones of a modern more equal world.

According to the available authentic sources, patriarchal society-imposed norms and regulations that the two poets were not guilty of. Their two poems "They shut me up in Prose" and "Mushrooms", which will be discussed in this article are visible representations of the same. The complex issues embedded in the poems extend an urgent invitation for critical studies in order to shun subjugations based on gender prejudice and support humanity to live in a just world without such biases.

In order to show the manner in which Dickinson's and Plath's two poems portray hegemony and, more specifically, to appreciate the way they granted women a strong voice, I will analyze their poems "They shut me up in Prose", and "Mushrooms", from a feminist perspective.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, stereotyping, patriarchal society, creative impact, prose, poetry, mushrooms, gender bias.

Introduction

Many iconic personalities have faced serious failures in life's struggles. Yet, they continued in their convictions and finally achieved historic success in their fields of expertise. If in case, the destined dreams are ignored and failed, one gets frustrated and finally sinks deeper into the darkness of disillusionment. Such a situation has been noticed among many ideal personalities where sincere and dedicated efforts have been misunderstood and rejected and tragedy entertained. Like any other tall-standing achievers, both Emily and Plath came off the Age's tests. Their writings disclose their dissatisfaction and rage about American social conventions of their time but applicable to the rest of the continents. They felt, definitely, as though, unfortunately, caused them a barrier to the fullness of life as women. They were very different as well as alike though lived and wrote at different times in history. (Thakur, n.d.)

Emily was born in 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts, to a prominent family, where she lived her whole life. She attended Amherst Academy and like her mother, who is little known because she was a passive wife of a domineering husband, Dickinson lived in almost total isolation from everyone except her family and a few visitors, whom she eventually refused and confined herself to extensive reading and correspondence with a circle of friends. ("Emily Dickinson | Poetry Foundation," n.d.). In her productive seclusion, she fed her mind and soul with wisdom and knowledge so deep and vast that when her sister discovered 1800 and more poems, Emily was strangely near so prolific. ("Life Of Crisis Impacts On The Poetry Of Emily Dickinson And Sylvia Plath - Free Essay Example - Edubirdie," n.d.).

Plath was born in Boston in 1932. Her father was an entomologist, and a professor and wrote books. Her mother was a first-generation American, and pursued a master's in teaching. Plath herself was a good student and was awarded a summer internship at Mademoiselle Magazine and went on to win a Fulbright scholarship to study at the University of Cambridge where she met Ted Hughes, and married and separated leading her to suicide at age 30. Sylvia Plath became the first person to posthumously win a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. ("Emily Dickinson | Poetry Foundation," n.d.).

The two personalities are one in their peculiarity, and in their ability to bring out something universal to human psyche pertaining to alienation, loneliness, pain, death and other eccentricity present in varied generations of human race. Both are now known as the most important American poets, and their poetry is widely read among people of all times and interests, though the glory of their success story is shadowed by the gloom and darker side of their tragic realities especially pertaining to Plath. They became living icons in a man-made patriarchal society, to eradicate, if not, avoid the repetition of such narrow-mindedness of men and their surroundings. ("Emily Dickinson | Poetry Foundation," n.d.).

When the poem writing was in vogue, females were expected to fulfil traditional roles within the house, marriage, and family. Dickinson's era considered poetry and men higher. And so, poetry which was on higher ground was reserved for men who were looked upon as higher intellectuals than women. Contrary to it, prose was regarded to be lower in rank and so was left for women. Keeping social conventions at the back of her mind. For Dickinson too prose was prosaic, rigid and formulaic, against human freedom, unable

to fight and defend her identity with right diction. “prose” for her was a metaphor for blind following of existing stereotype society, to confined her in a “closet” as a “still” passive piece of a thing even when she was very young and. She disregards it suggesting that she could never feel his potential realized by writing in this style though it is her innate grace.(Franklin, n.d.).

she writes:

They shut me up in Prose –

As when a little Girl

They put me in the Closet –

Because they liked me “still” – (Franklin, n.d.).

Emily’s common poem no. F445A, “They shut me up in Prose” is known to be a resistance poem because there is resistance from the first–person speaker for opposing and cutting off its creative power, the very gift of Nature and Grace. Most seriously, above all, she is curtailed and deprived from exercising poetic power, her inborn talent. ‘closet’ is a strong word equal to concealment, and could be a state of secrecy. Was it that the patriarchal ethos trying to keep Emily or women’s capability a secret, not willing to accept the women’s true self? So, Dickinson’s world could be associated to lack of openness, acceptance, generosity; in crux, without a big heart to give a space other than the prejudiced enforcement of “only this” and “not that” for the two genders-male and female. (Franklin, n.d.). She voiced the same ideas in the other poems like,

Tis true - They shut me in the Cold - (F658A)

Why - do they shut me out of Heaven? (F268A),

revealing that the sufferings of womenfolk was intense and hard. However, creatively swimming against the current of her surroundings, the speaker claims and finds her way out to escape and rise above the level of external constrictions through her defying zeal, and liberating imagination, (Franklin, n.d.).

There is positive energy and vibe sent out to her best friend and confidante, Susan Dickinson, wife of her brother Austin when Emily writes in a letter:

'We are the only poets, and everyone else is prose.'

I dwell in possibility —, (F466A)

meaning that her poems open up possibilities for all those trapped feelings of hers and those in similar woes.(“Owlcation,” n.d.).

They could never deny the joy of rhythmic poetry.

Poetry was exciting, original, revolutionary, exact to rebel provoking social restrictions.

Being successful is the desire of all dwelling on this human planet. So is true for Dickinson among many.

(Thakur, n.d.)

Thomas McClanahan wrote: ‘At her brutal best — and Plath is a brutal poet — she taps a source of power that transforms her poetic voice into a raving avenger of womanhood and innocence.’ (“Sylvia Plath Revision Flashcards | Quizlet,” n.d.)

Not far from Dickinson’s kind of situation, rather worst tragic than Dickinson’s story, Sylvia Plath suffered and succumbed to death in the hands of the oppressive world of men. Her poetry revolved around her struggle to find her place, with suggestions of female subjugation. she is therefore befitting to describe as a feminist poet, who writes about the plight of women even before the idea of feminism and women’s rights was forecast. In her much sort-after poem the “Mushrooms”, Plath likens the mushrooms to a repressed group where she herself is included. Mushrooms are used as a symbol and a metaphor for victimized women and their struggle for equal rights, foreshadowing a women’s rights movement, or an uprising of women.

The mushroom caps in the poem as though symbolizing Plath, Dickinson and women with “toes” and “noses”, make their way from within the soil out into the “air”, rounded and white, just like some healthy white skinned ladies without the joy of being oneself. The mushrooms breaking the earth and springing forth, yearning and seeking for “air” speaks volume about how they have been devoid of this basic need since long.

Our toes, our noses...

Acquire the air. (Plath & Walter, n.d.)

The poem is full of empathetic and disheartening tone because the usually beautiful, tender and delicate delicious mushrooms, supposed to be much sort-after and loved is compared to a female which the Plath’s society has thrown out of sight and out of notice. The poem is a dark irony in its making just as gender inequality is a man-made and make-belief myth. But just as there was possibility to acquire “air”, there was a way out towards redemption for Plath by writing.

Nobody sees us,

Stops us, betrays us;

The small grains make room.

And if alternatively, Plath’s mushrooms represent frailty, gender bias, any other pessimism that is integral to their being such as race, colour, origin, or sex, the ulterior motive is still the same. Imagery grows strong and stronger with reference to “fists” “hammers” and “rams” turning the poetic language into a revolutionary, as though the speaker is describing an uprising.

Soft fists insist on...

Our hammers, our rams,

Earless and eyeless,

She describes that the female during her time were shouldering their way through the holes because Women “should” be “Earless and eyeless” and without voices.

Perfectly voiceless,

Shoulder through holes.

Womenfolk cannot be forced to be satisfied “On crumbs of shadow rums” of what male society leaves behind.

Furniture sat upon in ordinary daily routine go unnoticed in a household. according to the poem, the women are “edible”, and so they are consumed, by men at their whims and pleasure.

We are shelves, we are tables,

We are meek,

We are edible,

but they will continue to “Nudge” and “shove” their way through. The speaker alludes, this might not be enough. They are “meek” like the gospel says in the Bible, that they will “Inherit the earth” and they are so many of them making them strong, and so get their “foot in the door” by the “morning” when it is fresh and new, a door to women liberation and freedom, equality and fraternity from the clutches of male’s iron hand. (“Emily Dickinson | Poetry Foundation,” n.d.)

So many of us!

So many of us!

We shall by morning

Inherit the earth.

Our foot’s in the door.(Plath, n.d.).

Conclusion

Dickinson and Plath are two poets of paradox. The creative impact of their writing lives on up till today. Their famous poems against male-hegemony, “They shut me up in Prose-” and “Mushrooms”, open a way to understand women’s condition and its place in the society. Dickinson’s life of reclusion, transcendentalism, and solitude shaped her poetry and persona to an insurmountable wisdom to discern social

evils and discrimination similar to Sylvia Plath. Her contemporaries never dreamt that she could bring out such treasure. When everyone was blind to her genius, she proved them wrong by placing her classic literary works before the eye of the spectators. Later on, Plath like Dickinson walked the well-trodden path of Emily true to her psychological yearnings. She sounds more shocking and tragic in rage and trauma but her ability to express what often remained inexpressible to the rest inspires millions. Until her death by suicide, Plath remained dynamically lively, making her unique voice heard and an outstanding use of literary technique.

In short, the two American poets of two Ages in similar hunger to breakthrough conventional stereotyping male- dominant society succeeded in their search for a better just and equal world in their era and down the ages thereafter. They selflessly thought for the rest of womenfolk and responded to the call of revolution and renewal at the cause of their name and reputation. Today, they stand tall inspiring everyone to imbibe their feminist passion for the redemption of all the enslaved women.

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