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A Madwoman or Crippled by Society? A Study of Disability and Depression in Plath's Poems

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Original Article

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Abstract

The present study explores the selected poems by Plath – “Tulips”, “Edge”, and “The Jailer”, through Disability framework. It aims at introducing Plath and her work as contrary to pre-established notions of her as a madwoman suffering from psychic disability and her work under its direct influence. The study investigates how certain bodies of literature and their authors are stigmatized as pathological based on few tragic events. Social model of disability refuses to believe that the individuals themselves are disabled and mentally ill and elucidates the ways society and social factors disable them (Michael Oliver, 1990). The present study contributes to the idea that Plath and her work have been unjustly pathologized in the name of the so-called “depression” which otherwise could have been mere negative emotions or outcome of a number of tragic encounters. The present study highlights social and domestic factors of Plath’s life e.g. her marital life, barriers she faced in her career, being medicalized multiple times, that might have amplified in her the distress, anxiety, and distrustfulness towards life. These emotions elevated, although not abnormal and uncommon, however, are considered by most scholars as causes of her mental disability. The present study seeks to repudiate Plath’s image as a madwoman by studying the selected poems and focusing on traces of the events she left in these poems that hint at the tough time life gave her. The present work offers Plath and her work a fresh perspective and new insights, thus is significant in itself.

Introduction/Literature Review

Oliver (1990) rejected the medical model rather asserted that medicalization of disability holds the disabled person responsible for the predicaments arising from his/her disability, be it mental illnesses or functional limitations (p. 1). He clarified that the doctors’ tendency to treat disability as

illness has its origins in the societal pressure which (irrationally) view them as authorities on the subject. He believed it to be wrong that the medical authorities have a major say in how the disabled people should work, educate, benefit, or live. What pained him more was not the deciding power of the doctors about the disabled people but the effects of those decisions.

The medical professionals leave no stone unturned in bringing the disabled back to what they call 'normal' and in the process any kind of painful surgical procedures imposed on them in the name of treatments are justifiable (p. 3). In order to work out the problems of disability, the social model proposed that the disabled need to be empowered about their own lives. Oliver (1990) suggested to draw a line between what the doctors can and cannot practice when treating the disabled people (p. 6).

Mulvany (2000) cited the experiences of people with mental illnesses to maintain their identities as a person and not just patients (pp. 587–588). Most sociologists' work appears inapplicable to the sufferings of people with mental agony since they fail to acknowledge that extreme discomfort is caused by disorganized and racing thoughts. She considered how people cope the unstable mental conditions along with their work (p. 591). She observed that sociological studies do not take into account the difficulties people with psychiatric disabilities face while receiving medical treatment. She praised the disability studies for examining psychiatric disability as a social creation (p. 596).

Saunders (2004) investigated the gap in disability studies from the vantage point of children's literature which gives rise to misinterpretations of disability among young readers. This gap fails to acknowledge the important role disability images in children's literature can play in shaping social attitudes (para. 3). Literature is important in promoting gender inequality among young readers who shape their understanding of their position in society through these texts (Young children's perceptions, para. 4–6). Children's picture books can make readers think that altering the conventional social norms is more accurate rather than expecting the disabled people adapt to a disabling environment. This is the spirit of social model of disability (Young children's perceptions, para. 7). Children's literature shows how disability affects familial relationships, causes conflicts, changes the behaviour of individuals towards each other based on socially imposed opinions, and halts the disabled to take decisions of their own lives (Young children's perceptions, para. 13).

Carson (2009) reasoned that the most disabled people's recognition of themselves mainly results from the negative attitude of medical professionals who make the disabled believe that the flaw lies in their body, that they are not 'normal' which is 'internalized oppression' (pp. 6–9). The paper saw social disability as parallel to racism and homophobia and emphasized the vital role of language in disseminating positivity for disabled people by choosing to avoid discriminatory terms for addressing them (pp. 17–19).

Bampi, Guilhem, and Alves (2010) suggested that the study of social model of disability can help disability studies to become a growing body of research (pp. 817–818). In order to fully accept one's identity, the acknowledgement of one's disability is important, yet the problem that comes along with it is the painful realization of belonging to the stigmatized group of society (p. 820). The study characterized disability not as an illness but a social construct which needs to be understood in relation to the treatment of disabled people and the context in which they confront difficulties. The researchers asserted that the social model does not leave sick people out from receiving health care benefits unlike the medical model (p. 822).

Tugli, Klu and Morwe (2014) contended that the medical model sees the 'wrong' in the disabled person himself and works its way to medically treat the 'wrong'. The study put forward different factors which contribute in imposing obstacles for the disabled e.g. inaccessibility of facilities such as transport, higher education, employment, insufficient funding to universities, communication technology, segregated services, and lack of autonomy, to name a few (pp. 332–334). The researchers argued that disability being a social construct requires solutions also with the help of social involvement.

Goering (2015) asserted that the societal attitude towards the disabled changes the way they think about themselves. The paper revealed that it is the fear of seeming vulnerable that causes the difficulties faced by the disabled (due to impairments) being discussed confidentially, and not publically. She thought that people's awareness of disability rights can enable the disabled to talk out loud about the problems they encounter because of their impairments without the fear of being treated as inferior. She questioned why people with birth defects are considered as normal form of human diversity but people with disorders are not. She talked about disabled people who embrace their disability as a significant factor in their personal growth and groomed perspective towards life.

Analysis

"Tulips" (1965) was written after Plath recovered from an appendectomy in 1961. It is an account of Plath reminiscing her days at the hospital for a surgery just few days after she had a miscarriage. Her history with the hospitals and the two painful experiences one after another brought her to the state of wanting peace by submitting herself to the circumstances which she describes in "Tulips" (1965), as

...it is winter here./Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in./I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly./As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands./I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions./I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses/And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons.

The first stanza sheds light on Plath's mental state of embracing the serenity the environment bestowed on her which is suggested by the imagery of white walls, the light in the room, the quiet and peace. She accepts her disliking towards *explosions* which can be taken as a symbol of life, activity, and engagements rather she takes pleasure in the nothingness of the things, herself and the milieu she finds herself in. By giving away her name (thus, her recognition), her day-clothes (individuality), body (her entire being), and history (her past) to the medical staff, she feels free of the burden. She becomes one of them; the patients in the hospital, by blending in, by not being Sylvia Plath, the bright poet, but just one of the many patients. Mulvany (2000) also mentioned the struggles of patients with mental illnesses to maintain their identities as individual beings, but Plath has come to a point where this struggle seems futile. Mulvany's (2000) claim of the psychiatric disability as a social creation complements Plath's state since she sees no point in fighting for life or empowerment over her body instead she yields to the peace that the time in the hospital brings her. It suggests that the hard times and tragic experiences Plath had in her life; e.g. recent miscarriage, Otto's death, ECTs, rejections from desired academic courses, physical abuse by Hughes, all contributed to her melancholic state of mind. Every incident was either social or familial that added up to her being dejected, therefore, she stops striving for the things to go her way this time. She is living in the moment and forgetting all about her past, her marriage, miscarriage, in fact everything. Disturbed mental state is a social creation, said Mulvany (2000).

Oliver (1990) argued that people who are considered disable are mostly deprived of the right or empowerment of their own lives or body. It is the medical professionals who make the decisions

for them which makes the patients feel powerless and feeble. Plath, given her painful history with hospitals and the forced and horrible electroshock therapies, has now succumbed to whatever is coming her way during the appendectomy. She shows no resistance to it rather welcomes each bit of calm and silence that comes her way. She seems in agreement to the stillness of the moments in her hospital room.

She asserts, *I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly...* which reflects her main concern in that particular moment i.e. to relinquish herself to the circumstances, liberate herself from every thought and make peace with herself. *Learning peacefulness* indicates that she did not have a peaceful life prior to this but now she is seizing the opportunity and making the most of it.

Plath writes,

My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water/Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently./They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep./Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage—.../My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;/Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.

She refers to her body as a weak insignificant pebble ran over by water, the most powerful element of the matter, and compares it to the medical staff attending to her. She affirms that they are smoothing her gently which implies the care she receives from the nurses which helps her put behind the tough times of her life and welcome the tranquility offered by the present. She associates numbness and sleep with *bright needles* that gives the idea of the relief and break from the agonizing pain of her past memories. The contrasting image of needles hurting as well as causing sleep and therefore, providing an escape from the reality for a while suggests that Plath is taking the rough with the smooth.

She voices out her desire to be free of the responsibilities of her life; her husband and daughter, and claims herself perplexed and lost between what to choose; either her own freedom and quiet of the isolation or the life of frequent activity being a poet, a wife, and a mother. She considers her family life as a baggage too heavy to carry on anymore and feels confused in prioritising her own contentment over the happiness of her husband and child; a duty that seems too tiring to fulfill. Kirk (1989) mentions,

While she was in the hospital recovering from the appendectomy, Ted brought her an airmail letter from *The New Yorker*. They had mailed her a first-reading contract ... The contract included various fees that would be paid to her...and incorporated additional payment for poems that the magazine decided to publish. With the contract, *The New Yorker* had mailed a check for \$100. Sylvia was ecstatic over this boost of confidence in her future work and the promise of future income as a result of it.

This hints at the success journey of her literary career she was ready to embark on. Just the thought of it made her want to be independent of the familial duties and become a successful writer, not merely a domestic wife to Hughes and mother to Frieda. Moreover, she recently had a challenging time dealing her relationship with Hughes which may point at her detached feelings towards him and her bend towards her own career. Rain (2018) quotes Sylvia, *Ted beat me up physically a couple of days before my miscarriage: the baby I lost was to be born on his birthday. I thought this an aberration ...* Kean (2017) also argues, *Plath alleged Ted Hughes beat her two days before she miscarried their second child and that Hughes wanted her dead ...* Preston (2015) states about Hughes' tendency towards violence:

There was always something of the matinee idol about Ted Hughes: 6 ft 2 in tall, often dressed in a black corduroy jacket and with a face like a hawk—he had an astonishing effect on women.

Fallon (2017) states that the,

unpublished letters Plath sent to her former therapist ... allege that Hughes beat her just days before she miscarried their second pregnancy ... her husband told her that he wished she were dead.

Cook and Polgar (2015) assert,

A social model of disability moves the location of the disability out of the person and into social structures. It recognizes that social perceptions, attitudes, institutions...all contribute to the creation of disability...disability creation results from a...combination of personal characteristics, physical settings, and cultural norms...

These lines from "Tulips" (1965), therefore, convey that neither was Plath a woman with subordinating tendencies nor was her society inclined to give her any leverage on her troublesome life. Plath did not want to just be trapped in the suppressive cultural norms and socially expected domestic roles of a wife and mother. She craved more, worked for more, but all she got was dictations on how to live her life, how to care for others, and not thinking of her own happiness. The social attitudes and cultural norms snatched her independence, chained and disabled her from accomplishing her desires. She believed in herself and wanted the world to recognise her potential and worth but fortune had something inexplicably tragic in store for her future. Her aims and high ambitions for her future are clear from these lines:

"I am a writer.... I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me." "Spare me cooking three meals a day," she wrote, "spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote."

Plath wanted freedom to achieve in her chosen field, to be a famous, commercially successful writer. That she might have to choose between marriage and a career made her angry and fearful; In any case, she refused to become "a 'meek' Christian wife." As she expressed it in her journal, *I am I—I am powerful*.

She proceeds in "Tulips" (1965) with,

I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat/stubbornly hanging on to my name and address./They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations./Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley/I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books/Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head./I am a nun now, I have never been so pure./I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted/To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty./How free it is, you have no idea how free—/The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,/And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets...

She paints an image of herself being a boat that has remained incapable of carrying the cargo to its destination and have let it slip. This implies dual connotations; first, it may refer to her miscarriage – the loss of her second child. Second, it may also mean that she is ready to move forward from this loss since she claims to have *let* things slip and continues with the name, identity, and all the worldly possessions she holds dear. She feels purified and cleansed of all the material belongings, the worldly attachments, and yearns for the serenity in the emptiness and vacuity of her surroundings. The time in hospital gives her a chance to rid herself from every thought, relation, and connection that holds her back from acquiring the peace she longs for. She repeatedly asks for freedom and liberty from the confines of familial bonds and the emotional baggage that comes with these relationships. An escape from the load of duties to herself and the world is what Plath asks for in these lines. She wants to leave everything materialistic behind and find calmness in what lies ahead – freedom from the restraints of emotional ties.

Saunders (2004) also talked about the social model of disability which requires the conventional norms to be modified according to the needs of the disabled people. Plath, being a wife and a mother, yearns for some time alone to herself and not to be in the role of a perfect domestic woman. While she enjoys her liberation from the domestic obligations at the hospital, it is unfair to expect her to adjust in a disabling relationship with Hughes. The aforementioned claims of physical abuse at the hands of her husband suggest that Plath's marital life had been falling apart. Pursuing her passion (writing), recovering from miscarriage, appendectomy, and looking after Frieda, Plath seemed to have her hands full to an extent that dealing with an abusive husband and marriage was out of question. Hughes' oppressive nature is described by Smith (2006) who writes,

Ted Hughes...was a domestic tyrant who issued a 'Draft Constitution' to his mistress, instructing her how to carry out household chores and look after his children. Hughes's domestic instructions were...written in 1967 when he and Wevill were living...with Frieda and Nicholas... He banned her from staying in bed beyond 8am, ordered her to dress straight away and told her not to catch up on sleep. The two pages of typed instructions said that she should teach the children German, play with them for at least an hour a day and introduce at least one meal with 'a recipe we have never had before' on a weekly basis. Hughes made clear he had no intention of cooking 'except in emergencies'.

Plath mentions that she does not want any flowers which shows her disinterest in the vibrancy and vividness of life, rather she preferred to be left alone, away from any kind of emotional attachments.

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.../Their redness talks to my wound,./ they seem to float, though they weigh me down,/Upsetting me with...their color./Nobody watched me before, now I am watched.

Plath, going through a difficult phase of life, chooses tulips as the subject of the poem because she wants to associate the discomfort that the thoughts of a happy joyous life bring her with the predicaments she experienced in a short span of time. The fresh and bright colour of red tulips hurts her since it reminds her of her 'wound' and the dullness of her current life with the appendectomy, the miscarriage, abusive marriage etc. All these factors contribute to Plath's estrangement from the cheerful happy life the red tulips remind her of, waiting for her after the recovery.

Tulips symbolise different emotions depending on the colour variation. In this poem, the tulips may be taken as the symbols of life full of love and passion. Plath writes about red tulips particularly which can represent different emotions. *...red tulips grow as signs of everlasting love... The most common meaning for tulips is perfect or deep love. Because tulips are one of the first flowers to bloom in the spring, they can mean rebirth.* (Tulips Meaning and Symbolism, 2016). It may also mean that at this time, Plath does not want a reminder of the love she shares with her family for it may limit her again with the thoughts of all the domestic duties, or that the symbols of everlasting love, the tulips, may have changed their meaning in Plath's life. In spite of everlasting, the love in Plath's life seems to be fading away and she has no intentions of holding on to it either.

Tulips...symbolize "happy years" and "love." (History and Meaning of Tulips). *The beauty and grace of a simple Tulips means the flower has become a symbol for meanings like: Perfect, enduring love between partners or family members, Undying passionate love...* (The Tulip Flower, Its Meanings and Symbolism). Plath claims that the apparent light-weighted, cheery, beautiful tulips weigh her down which may be emblematic of how she feels suppressed by the burden of the happy moments of her life which no longer exist and which she no longer wishes

for. She has found peace in the whiteness of things as well as the purity and freedom that it offers. She asserts that no one was there for her before but now that she has made her peace with it, everyone has started caring for her and watching her may be just because she has had a surgery. It suggests her resentment over how nobody had her back and she was left all alone to deal with her troubles. It also gives an insight into how she might have wanted her mother and brother to be there for her, help her emotionally to stand up to the difficult times but no one was there when she needed them the most. No one watched over her which adds up to her despair.

... And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself./The vivid tulips eat my oxygen./Before they came the air was calm enough,.../without any fuss./Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise...They concentrate my attention, that was happy/Playing and resting without committing itself...The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;/They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat,/ The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,/And comes from a country far away as health.

Plath mentions her desire to disappear or vanish from the environment surrounded by tulips. She feels suffocated due to the tulips all around her, making the place familiar with the music of life and joy. She feels that her peace and calm is threatened by these tulips and surrealistically compares them with wild animals and African cats. This implies that she feels horrified by the concept of happiness they refer to (which is to find contentment with the life she was living for her family). On the contrary, her idea of pleasure and happiness differs from the typical one. She wants to live for herself for some time and the tulips are in her way of doing it, preventing her from enjoying the tranquility of the moment. The presence of tulips makes everything worse. Even the water tastes salty and bitter and therefore, does not seem to help her recover and get healthy anytime soon.

“Tulips” (1965) is Plath’s account of different unfortunate events happening in her life which compel her to find peace in herself, isolate herself from the temporary relations, fancy ideas of everlasting love, happily ever-afters, and escape from the constraints of being a domestic woman. Any person who has lost and suffered as much as Plath did can have similar thoughts and perceptions towards life and relationships. There is no reason to stigmatize Plath as someone pathological and mentally ill. Thus, labelling her as a madwoman is in no way justifiable. The society disabled her more than any other thing.

The woman is perfected./Her dead/Body wears the smile of accomplishment,/The illusion of a Greek necessity.../Her bare/Feet seem to be saying:/We have come so far, it is over./Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,/One at each little.../The moon has nothing to be sad about,/Staring from her hood of bone./She is used to this sort of thing./Her blacks crackle and drag.

“Edge” (1963) by Plath, one of the last two poems written before her suicide, talks about the death of a woman who seems to be proud of her being dead as if she has finally reached her goal or has accomplished the purpose of life. She makes a reference to the ‘Greek necessity’ about whom Caronia (2008) writes, *Medea...: the woman who kills her children in vengeance when her husband deserts her* for another woman. It reflects Plath’s own suicidal thoughts in her last days. It denotes that her suicide was not an abrupt decision rather, as the poem suggests, she had been contemplating about death and the ultimate freedom for quite some time. Since she mentions the character from Greek mythology who killed her children to avenge her husband’s betrayal, it brings to the surface the idea that Plath might have thought about killing Frieda and Nicholas too with her but then she refrained from doing it. Assuming Plath’s poetry to be confessional, it can be understood that she moves on to talk about the journey of her own life and that she cannot continue it anymore. She mentions the myth of Medea and writes that *We have*

come so far, it is over which connotes that she is talking about her children with whom she was living after Hughes' betrayal. Theriault (2017) also argues that,

Her situation was dire; she was a single mother caring for two toddlers, rising every day at 4 a.m. to write – her only source of income – before the children woke up. That winter was the worst to hit London for more than a century. 'The lights failed and candles, of course, were unobtainable,'... 'Nerves failed and marriages crumbled. Finally, the heart failed. It seemed the cold would never end.' Plath's children endured several bouts of coughs and colds, and then in January 1963 all three of them came down with a bad case of the flu. Life in London, which just a few months ago had looked so promising, began to seem impossible and hopeless.

Plath's life journey had been tough and challenging with several shocking and tragic incidents yet she managed to cope with the hard times. However, it became difficult with the passage of time since the losses were huge and there seemed no end to them in the near future. Plath committed suicide few days after she composed "Edge" (1965). Not only was she depressed due to the loneliness Hughes had gifted her in form of infidelity but also the responsibility of two toddlers was making it hard for her to balance her life. It is said that Hughes and Plath met after Plath sent him a farewell letter which he received earlier and went to meet her. But the meeting did not go well about which Pederson (2015) writes,

Plath wrote a letter stating that she planned to soon leave the country, never to see Hughes again. Plath mailed the letter on Friday, expecting it not to arrive until the following day, however an efficient postal service delivered the letter to Hughes on Friday afternoon. Hughes rushed...to see Plath at her home... An argument ensued and Plath burnt the letter. Hughes wrote of the meeting, "What happened that night? Your final night." The poem continues, "Late afternoon, Friday, my last sight of you alive. Burning your letter to me, in the ashtray, with that strange smile." Plath attempted to telephone Hughes on Saturday, however the phone at Hughes's flat was answered by Hughes's lover Susan Alliston. Plath took her own life on the Sunday evening. Hughes was in bed with Alliston that night.

These lines point at the recurring unfaithfulness of Hughes which proved to be the final nail in the coffin of their relationship. Plath might have been disappointed all over again after finding out Hughes with another woman after Assia Wevill. At this point, she could not take any more of the pain of her crumbling marriage, an isolated life in a country she did not like to live in, and finding out about Hughes' disloyalty. All these factors add up and push her to an edge where she starts comparing her children to serpents and has to choose between the life she is living and death which will bring peace to her. It is, thereby, no surprise that she chooses the latter. Samaha (2007) quotes Michael Oliver about the nature of social model of disability:

[The social model] does not deny the problem of disability but locates it squarely within society. It is not individual limitations, of whatever kind, which are the cause of the problem but society's failure to ... adequately ensure the needs of disabled people...Hence disability ... is all the things that impose restrictions on disabled people; ranging from individual prejudice to institutional discrimination ... [D]isability is wholly and exclusively social.

Such is the hypocrisy of the American society that allows a man to be openly disloyal to his wife and children but a woman is expected to do what she wishes within the constraints and barriers of social and cultural norms and expectations of motherhood and wifeness. Lastly, Plath states that it is usual and common for calamities like these to happen to people therefore, there is nothing to lament over. She has gone past the edge to a point where all the misfortunes happened to her no longer matter, as if they have lost their significance since she is now perfected in death – her final destination. Therefore, Plath's life and her work have been unjustifiably pathologized. Seeing someone as psychologically abnormal just because they

cannot deal with the stress and trauma like Plath suffered in her life is completely erroneous and should be discouraged.

My night sweats grease his breakfast plate.../Is that all he can come up with,/The rattler of keys?/I have been drugged and raped./Seven hours knocked out of my right mind/Into a black sack/Where I relax, foetus or cat,/Lever of his wet dreams.

“The Jailer” (1965), by Plath, written in October 1962, a couple of months after her separation with Hughes, is an account of a woman in an abusive relationship — both, emotionally and physically. Her poetry is mostly read as confessional therefore, this poem can also be read as a recollection of the real-life events of her life. She starts off with the line possessing sexual connotations addressing to a male figure — either husband or a boyfriend. She positions herself as a captive waiting for her liberty from the shackles of her jailer’s cage. She begins with quite an optimistic tone by mocking him for not thinking of something more tempting yet torturous than the keys to her freedom. Most of the studies suggest the jailer in this poem to be Hughes but he can be someone else as well — a boyfriend who may have sexually assaulted her and Plath would have written about the incident after she became free of the marital bounds with Hughes.

Plath recalls the brutality of the jailer towards her by writing about all the ways he mistreated her — the drugging and raping, being unconscious for several hours which she regarded as a time to rest from the painful labor she undergoes every time he abuses her physically. Her employment of the imagery of a cat and a fetus shows how vulnerable she feels to the jailer. Goering (2015) also claimed that the attitude of society forms the way people with distress and sorrow think of themselves. Since Plath here establishes herself in a fragile and unstable state before her jailer, it suggests that her husband/boyfriend’s abusive attitude towards her might be the reason she sees herself as a victim, or someone who needs sleeping pills to escape the oppression and maltreatment. She contends, *Something is gone./My sleeping capsule,.... /He has been burning me with cigarettes./Pretending I am a negress.../I am myself. That is not enough.* According to Swaine and French (2013),

The social model of disability recognises the social origin of disability in a society geared by, and for, non-disabled people. The disadvantages and restrictions, often referred to as barriers, permeate every aspect of the physical and social environment. Disability can, therefore, be defined as a form of social oppression.

The social oppression of this social model of disability is also evident in the fact that Plath mentions her real self being not enough for Hughes which implies that he wanted her to be someone else, to lose her identity and become someone she is not merely to please him. His ruthless behaviour knows no bounds as he burns her body with cigarettes and treats her like an African slave. She is nothing to him, of no value, or worth but just a body he requires to fulfil his sexual needs. This reflects the objectification of women in Plath’s time when women were supposed to please men no matter what the cost. Lamb (2011) argues, *The American society in the 1950’s was mainly founded on the ideology of the housewife, shaped by magazines and other media targeted to women.*

Also, it is believed that *In the 1950s, women felt tremendous societal pressure to focus their aspirations on a wedding ring* (Mrs. America: Women’s Roles in the 1950s). Oliver’s social model of disability also discusses the same point that *“disability ... is all the things that impose restrictions on disabled people; ranging from individual prejudice to institutional discrimination... [D]isability is wholly and exclusively social.”* It confirms that Plath and many other women like her in 1950s America felt trapped in the name of sacred bond of wedlock.

All the description of the jailer's exploitation of the female speaker indicates that Plath was subjected to the degrading, tormenting, and animalistic behaviour of Hughes in the marriage. Koren and Negev (2006) maintain, *Ted took Assia to a hotel, where he made love –... "So violent and animal, he ruptures her. A turns against him, goes quite cold."* Nor did Assia make any secret of Ted's ferocious lovemaking when it came to her office friends. She told Edward Lucie-Smith: *"You know, in bed, he smells like a butcher."* These lines reflect Hughes' brute tendencies when it came to sexual intercourse with women, be it his wife or a lover. *The fever trickles and stiffens in my hair./My ribs show. What have I eaten?/Lies and smiles./All day, gluing my church of burnt matchsticks,...*

Plath here explains the extent of her anxiety of the jailer upon seeing whom she feels the fear running all over her and her body becomes tensed up. She furthers with the description of her physical condition which seems not good. Her ribs have become visible which is a clear sign of famishment at the hands of her jailer since a prolonged period. Plath, a confessional poet, continues to speak about the fragility of the marital relationship by comparing it to a church of matchsticks which are now burnt, thus, her marriage fallen apart. She discusses the nature of a marriage like that of a church where everything is supposed to be respected, where no abuse or harm is expected. Instead, her relationship with her husband is contrary to the holy and sacred covenant. She explains her continuous efforts of how hard she is trying to glue her home, her marriage, back together from a shattered state.

His high cold masks of amnesia./How did I get here?/Indeterminate criminal,/I die with variety—
/Hung, starved, burned, hooked...I wish him dead or away./That, it seems, is the
impossibility.../What would the dark/Do without fevers to eat?/What would the light/Do without eyes
to knife, what would he/Do, do, do without me?

Lastly, Plath maintains that her jailer, that being her husband, tends to forget her and be oblivious to her existence after torturing her emotionally and physically. She questions her own sense of judgment that led her to become a prisoner to this man. She lists various ways in which she is punished and wants him gone but expresses her melancholy over the unlikelihood of it. Plath believes that if she being a captive to him is confining her, similarly, he being her jailer is also bound to her since he has no other outlet to practice his brutality. His darkness and evilness would not be unleashed and therefore she gives up on her freedom from him. Their interdependency shows the confinement they face in the name of marital bond. It has been researched that *At the start of the 20th century, divorce was still considered taboo and a foreign concept* (Olito, 2019). Plath and Hughes also did not get a divorce rather just separated which confirms that they were conscious of the societal patterns of the sacrament of matrimony and could not wholly deny them. Cain (2002) argues *...on the morning of the February 11, 1963, Plath, still separated, but not legally divorced from Hughes...* which suggests that they both had a mutual decision not to file for a divorce. This corresponds to Saunders' (2004) view who thought that the society's disabling environment is the cause of people who become mentally stressed and then are stigmatized as disable. That is due to the societal obstacles which hinder their liberty. Hence, they are not allowed to practice their autonomous minds and go into depression and anxiety.

Conclusion

In short, social barriers serve as the reason of people labelled as disabled (both physically and psychologically). It requires different factors and causes to make a person disabled, feel down and miserable just like Sylvia Plath who otherwise was an amazingly brilliant poet with immense talent. However, the societal tensions and familial disruptions pushed her to the edge of an emotional breakdown where she could not take the pressure anymore and ended her life.

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