

Terrible Fish in Sylvia Plath's Mirrors: Perception and Relevance of Mirror Imagery

Rajani Sharma

One mirrory eye –

A facet of knowledge. (“Berck-Plage” 48-49)

William Freedman demonstrates in his article entitled “The Monster in Plath’s Mirror” that for Sylvia Plath, mirror holds great significance because “the search in the mirror is ultimately a search for the self, often for the self as artist,” especially female artist who dissolves all self-linked taboos and given masks of regressive-cocoon shaped femininity in the cauldron of massive psychic energies emanating from her creativity in the light of which she sees herself as an autonomous female self. The mirror imagery thus signifies the consciousness of woman speaker who verbalizes the creative process of woman artist when she initiates into the inner world in search of her true self.

Since her childhood Sylvia Plath was greatly impressed with the character of Alice in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* whom she refers to, as Pamela J. Annas has quoted as, “my muse Alice,” climbed through the mirror into another world” (3). Preoccupied with the curiosity to know what lies within the mirror like Alice, Sylvia Plath believes that mirror not only stands for the rational and logical view of this linear world to be registered through the senses, but also what lies beyond this tangible world. Annas remarks about Plath’s attraction for the mirror:

Sylvia Plath too often found herself up on the mantelpiece touching her hands to the glass and wondering whether to pass through, catching glimpses of a world as strange as but far less full of delight than the world Alice saw. She balanced

on the border between two worlds and wrote about what she saw from that privileged and precarious position, not as wondering and innocent Alice but as Gerd, the crystal gazer . . . (3).

The female protagonist in Plath's "Mirror" identifies herself with the inanimate mirror, which faithfully reflects whatever comes within the line of its vision. She has got no identity of her own except those assigned to her by her male counterpart such as wife, mother, daughter and living doll to cater to the needs of her master who is "Lord of mirror." Freedman points out that this mirror is a symbol of female "passivity" and "subjugation" and that "figure gazing at and reflected in the mirror is neither the child nor the man the woman-as-mirror habitually reflects, but a woman." She feels that in this patriarchal world she is powerless and passive creature who is expected to have everlasting beauty and youth. However, with the passing of time, she grows old and with that, her beauty fades away. She does not accept casually that she is getting old like the Queen in children's story who possesses a magical mirror that answers any question, to whom she often asks: "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who in the land is fairest of all?" to which the mirror always replies "You, my queen, are fairest of all." But when Snow White reaches the age of seven, she becomes as beautiful as the day, and when the queen asks her mirror, it responds: "Queen, you are full fair, 'tis true, but Snow White is fairer than you" ("Snow White"). Thus the mirror tells the truth to the woman who relies on the false impression given by such liars as "moon" and "candles" since the candles and moon suggest the beautiful faces popular with romantic dreamers. Essentially, she is not such but is made to suffer this manic depression because of the objective attitude towards her resulting in her own peril as T.S. Eliot writes in his famous poem "Burnt Norton": "Go, go, go, said the bird; human kind / Cannot very much bear reality" (43-44). The mirror projects what is thought of her in this male dominated society and since, she, herself a

mirror, cannot escape from this world as Susan Van Dyne remarks on woman's loss of self confidence in her perception as the mirror: "Locating in her perception as the mirror marginalizes the woman: her presence in the mirror vision is intermittent, and then only as a reflected object. The source of mirror's image, the observing mirror, does not exist as a subject at all (88).

But Plath's female protagonist senses the vicious conspiracy hatched against her very existence. She cannot loiter purposelessly in this tortuous world of passive adaptability and tries to understand what it means and has meant so far. She wants to recognize the mysterious depth of her role as an archetypal-mythical hero poet to throw away the stereotypical images of her own in the random and transformative poetic process. For this, she has to give up known means of control and accepted logic of causality in search of inner reality of her experience. She puts everyday sanity at risk in search of healing truth that lies behind accepted structures of belief. On the chariot of her creativity with a sharp sword of poetic power like an epic hero, she runs amuck through the safely preserved conventional glories and inhibitions of patriarchal abyss, made with insinuating intent to bind her womanhood; however, this regressive enclosure holds no significance for her as she resolves to alienate herself from whatever reside in this outer world. For Plath, interior journey is a source of recuperative powers; and that a sojourn into inner realm fills her being with refreshingly creative energy. She writes in her *Journal* entry October 17, 1951, "I don't know why I should be so hideously gloomy But at least the lower I go the sooner I'll reach bottom and start the upgrade again (39-40). Neumann's views are worth noting with regard to female creativity. He holds that "the female psyche is in far greater degree dependent on the productivity of the unconscious" (Stewart109).

The interior journey begins when the mirror transforms itself into a lake and with the emergence of lake, the woman / artist departs from

this world to recreate a new mythos, different from the prevailing ones. As Stewart suggests that her creativity enables her to make an alternative world, “If imprisoned in the labyrinth by outside forces, she must fly skyward. If her heritage is menial, she must create herself in new image. If she suffocates in traditional settings, she must find breathing space” (108). Rosenblatt counts three stages of initiatory process, “The first stage in the initiatory process involves transformation of external setting of the poem – landscape, seascape or hospital – into the symbolic landscape of death” (574). The second stage is the “stage of transformation, the self undergoes drastic forms of self transformation in order to escape from the violence of death-world. Paradoxically, this escape takes the form of physical destruction, including self-mutilation, dismemberment, or symbolic annihilation” (575). The implication is that the female should deliberately alienate herself from the outer world as well as her own sexual identity and should enact the drama of psychic death by killing the phantoms of her false self, as they haunt her in the semiotic realm, with the energies discharged from the unconscious or artistic power. Paula Bennet has referred to Virginia Woolf’s predicament as an artist “that as a novice reviewer she found that she could not speak her mind unless she first did ‘battle with a certain phantom’” (1). The phantom is the phantom of the angel of house. The Angel, as Paula Bennet suggests, represents the perfect and universally accepted traditional image of woman as “sympathetic, charming, utterly unselfish, domestic, self-sacrificing, and, above all pure.” For a woman / poet, Virginia Woolf declares, “Killing the Angel of the House,” is a “‘part of the occupation of the woman writer’ and necessary to the pursuit of her craft” (2). Stewart Grace holds that the rejection of so-called conventional image of woman is essential to create artist / woman; however, it requires relentless courage on her part to create ‘a new mythology’ of her own. That woman is essentially inferior to man because of missing of the marks (external genitals). This notion has to be falsified with an

innovative glorification of womanhood, which is possible through creative power – annihilating and creative at the same time.

When the artist must reject the mythic woman of literature written by men, must reject a stereotype of the “animus” conceptualized by Jung . . . , must ignore the theory of penis envy postulated by Freud, must fight an identification with her mother in order to individuate, . . . to create the artist / woman, the task seems Herculean rather than feminine. She must die as this mythic “feminine” woman in order to give birth to herself as an artist, a creator of myths. For her, the journey to the interior is often an acceptance of darkness there or in the place to which she returns (109).

Sylvia Plath strongly believes in her creative powers as she herself remarks in her *Journal* entry, “All I need to do is work, break open the deep mines of experience and imagination, let the words come and speak it all, sounding themselves” (162). Similarly, she celebrates creativity in her “Lady Lazarus” too, when she declares: “Dying / Is an art, like everything else” (43-44).

Each day the woman sees her face in the mirror and the mirror, not only takes note of every physical change in her, but also records every atom of experience falling upon her unconscious. Her conscious self tries to ignore her failures and inadequacy; however, they are faithfully inscribed to perfection in the record of mirror. She “comes and goes” staring into the mirror’s reality and then reaches the point when “faces and darkness” intervene and the mirror becomes a lake, “Now I am a lake,” an entrance to the terrain of unconscious when she leaves behind the world of waking consciousness (15, 9-10). It is through the mirror lake that she shifts into the creative world of *Death*. Rosenblatt states that this space of darkness can be arrived at through the deliberate departure from the symbolic world of linear norms, where those aspects of existence that consciousness normally separates and

opposes come together as one.” Rosenblatt suggests that Plath compares this dark space with the womb in the hope of “a condition of unity” different from that of consciousness that starts with Lacanion ‘mirror stage’ reducing the self to fulfill social obligation as an active social agent. Nevertheless, this journey proves to be successful as the female self “simultaneously confronts death and the origin of life.” He stresses on Plath’s prognostic vision, “The darkness into which the poet enters may be the prelude to her own death or it may be the means for her to gain a more vivid and intense existence” (573).

The mirror is *the semiotic realm*¹ where the female poet suffers the pangs of psychic death followed by spiritual rebirth. The mirror renders and solves the central issue of identity by splitting her consciousness into subject and object. It is only in this dark realm of lake-mirror that the young girl confronts her double. The double selves imply an immediate self in this material worldview and a total self, which remains a mystery unless it emerges in its totality after the ritual initiation and when it smashes the angel of the house. The young girl meets her true self “terrible fish,” she gets confused whether this is her self or not. The terrible fish with Leviathan-vigor eats and digests the stereotypical image of young girl and after a long sojourn in her Piscean eon comes onto the surface of the lake as an autonomous female self to terrify this world. All the thoughts, sense impressions, and experiences of young girl are offered up to the lake of spiritual world. “The terrible fish” is significant to represent her picture as a mature self. Virginia Woolf also, as Stewart has quoted, is of the opinion that self-confidence is essential for maturity. She observes, “Without self-confidence we are as babes in the cradle” (107). The mirror on the one hand is object, which reflects both the persona’s subordinate self as well as stresses on her repressed primeval self. “The fish is the autonomous person and author. It is the role rejecting woman / mother who, even as she proclaims her acceptance of the task, refuses passivity to mirror, man, infant or

whatever else is set before it” (Freedman). The phrase “like a terrible fish” reinforces the idea of rebellion. Woman’s psyche not only consists in beauty, fairness, and gentleness but also turns out to be “terrible” when she feels the violation of her rights at the hand of her male counterpart.

The ritual of initiation, leading to psychic death followed by spiritual rebirth, signifies the struggle between true and false self, has become the ubiquitous motif in most of Plath’s poem. The mirror dispels the illusion of the female protagonist by projecting her true self and she gathers up her courage to execute the masochistic act of self-mutilation i.e., killing the projected dummy because what the female protagonist desires for is not the harmonious balance between two warring forces, but an inclusive flaking off the inferior false self. Judith Kroll demonstrates that “a life lived by the false self, is not life but an intolerable death-in-life which can be overcome only by dying to that life” (Kroll 12). The desire for the rebirth of the self, however, takes various shapes, as the persona’s ambivalent attitude towards her double tends to interfere with her attempts at self-awareness. Elisabeth Bronfen believes that “dramatically protean resurrection of the self [is] so terrible that release from confinement is usually figured as a journey through death so that self-recreation and self-destruction are separated by a fine line” (64). The doubling of the self dissolves with the annihilation of false self, that is shed off like an “Old whore petticoat” in “Fever 103” (50) and “old bandages, boredom, old faces” are peeled off like onion and the persona is reborn “Pure as baby” in “Getting There” (66, 67). Bronfen again points out “Plath’s exploration of the oscillation between longing for extinction and transcendence of the self,” claims that this struggle “translates into fantasies of transformation, of escape from constriction and engulfment, and of flight, where casting off outgrown selves and overused masks lead to a naked renewal” (64). The same struggle is evident in “In Plaster” where the poetic persona sees her self from the other side of the mirror and suffers desperation and anxiety:

I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now:
The new absolutely white person and the old yellow one,
And the white person is certainly the superior one. (1-3)

But with the progression of the poem, this struggle culminates in her allegation of throwing out the white and beautiful mask with the acquisition of confidence in her real yellow self: “One day I shall manage without her, / And she’ll perish with emptiness, and begin to miss me” (55-56). A harmonious combination between these warring selves is prime requisite of the society, yet neither of them assimilates as the yellow self ignites within for assertion, prepared to spark off from its confinement, with a new belief in its ability to stand on its own as an autonomous female self. The real self declares: “I’m collecting my strength, one day I shall manage without her / And she’ll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me” (55-56). Similarly, in “Morning Song,” the woman tears off the imposed mask of motherhood by comparing herself with the floating clouds in the sky broken in rain to become a mirror lake, which reflects the gradual disappearing of the clouds at wind’s hand. She does not want to be credited with the honor of being a mother and identifies herself with the floating clouds, free to move in the open sky and to break themselves in rain at their own whim. The wind is suggestive of the primeval energy pushing her to see her real self in the mirror lake by dissolving her stereotypical image of Virgin Mary feeding her baby Christ:

I’m no more your mother
Than the clouds that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind’s hand. (7-9)

“Purdah” also demonstrates the recurrent pattern of rebirth motif of female protagonist with the extinction of her husband who suppresses her identity. Within the enclosure of Oriental harem of her husband, she becomes an object rather than a living being. She also visualizes herself

as a comatose and inert jade statuette, nothing more than that a precious stone of her lord's chattels:

Jade –
The stone of the side,
The agonized. (1-3)

In the presence of her husband, she feels that she is merely a reflecting object, while her husband is the "Lord of the mirror (21). Dr Pashupati Jha has remarked on the significance of mirror imagery to divulge the predicament of the woman in the enclosure of harem, "The expression "mirror" is quite apt and significant, for all women in harem are supposed to be inert objects like mirrors meant only for reflecting the wishes and whims of the harem-keepers" (82). However, the latent self within her unconscious needs action on her part and comes on to the surface of the water when she becomes aware of her true self, to kill her male counterpart as a lioness after casting off the meek image of a living doll. The shattering of the chandelier signifies a shattering of a passive and reflective mirror image of the female protagonist when she gathers her courage and strength to murder her husband.

Shattering
The chandelier
Of air that all day flies

Its crystals
A million ignorants. (43-47)

She is resurrected like Clytemnestra who by killing her husband Agamemnon, while naked and vulnerable in his bath, flouts the so-called traditional image of hers and emerges out as a hybrid portrait of a viper abusing her intimate access to Agamemnon. Moreover, the myth of Clytemnestra has been amalgamated with that of Moon Goddess "embodying her true self and symbolizing the story of a Moon heroine who ritually murders in his bath her Sun-god or Sun King" (Kroll 157).

Both Sun god and Agamemnon murdered at the hand of their female counterparts in their bath implies that the passive mirror is transformed into active slayer and the veil is replaced with the “cloak of holes.” Judith Kroll comments on the last three lines of the poem:

The Cassandra of Aeschylus, prophesying the event, calls Clytemnestra a “two footed lioness”. . . .The “shriek in the bath” is Agamemnon’s death-cry and “the cloak of holes” the raiment in which Clytemnestra enmeshes him and through which she stabs him” (157-158).

The inclusive rebirth of a passive and inert female protagonist is quite subtle and suave with the shifting from humbleness and hesitancy of veil to the finishing shriek of attack:

I shall unloose –
From the small jeweled
Doll he guards like a heart –

The lioness,
The shriek in the bath
The cloak of holes. (52-57)

In “Daddy”, too Sylvia Plath displays a picture of a role-rejecting daughter who, after bearing the pain of regression, turns out be a slayer replacing a devoted daughter. She mediates on her submissive position in her psyche and from her unconscious brings back her father as a primeval aggressor to be loathed as Nazi German, a devil so that she may slaughter him for her own survival like a hero in folktale:

There’s stake in your fat black heart
And the villager never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through. (76-80)

In “Face Lift,” the female protagonist suffers from an anxiety and is apprehensive at the very notion of getting old because with the passing of age, she will lose her physical charm and will no longer be capable of alluring her male counterpart. With this end in view, she wants to keep her beauty intact through the mechanical process of cosmetic-plastic surgery so that she may avoid masculine aversion of herself. Under the sedative effects of anesthesia, she visualizes herself moving in the palace of Egypt and then returning in the hospital ward:

Traveling

Nude as Cleopatra in my well-boiled hospital shift,
Fizzy with sedatives and unusually humorous,
I roll to an anteroom where a kind man
Fist my fingers for me. (10-13)

The image of Cleopatra has a two-fold significance for the woman in this poem. Firstly, she thinks that after this surgery, she will acquire a beautiful face like Queen Cleopatra, but her attitude regarding herself changes as she thinks that she is a post-operative patient and does not possess a royal status enjoyed by Cleopatra in ancient Egypt. The nudity of Cleopatra geminates the seeds of consciousness in her psyche, triggering her off from the enclosure of perfect image of living doll. She departs from this filthy world in search of her true self. She initiates into the dark realm of semiotic where she cannot see her face clearly. The implication is that in the darkness of womb like situation her false self of living doll dissolves.

At the count of two

Darkness wipes me out like chalk on blackboard . . .
I don't know a thing. (15-17)

In the inner world begins the enactment of psychic drama as she ponders over her previous life. In the “tapped cask” of her psyche, she feels “years draining in to my pillow” and she “grow[s] backward” to become a girl of twenty (18, 21). She visualizes herself a girl of twenty

sitting in her “long skirts on” her “first husband’s sofa,” but this time she is not brainless doll to satisfy male ego; this time she becomes “broody” (22-23). Her previous false self is not skin-deep; she casts off her false self since “S[skin] does not have roots, it peels away as paper” (21). She also feels her “fingers / Buried in the lambswool of dead poodle” (23-24). The speaker’s dissociation from the old body or false image is violent transformation as she suffers a lot of pain to suspend the false self of her own. Undoubtedly, her face has been lifted in this poem when she realizes:

Now she is done for, the dewlapped lady
I watched settle, line by line, in my mirror—
Old sock-face, sagged on a darning egg
They have tapped her in a laboratory jar. (26-29)

Here the old sock face, sagged on a darning egg is the previous face of a perfect doll she lets “wither incessantly for the next fifty years” (30). The psychic death of the false self culminates with resurrection of a new self “swaddled in gauze, / Pink and smooth as a baby” (33-34). In “Brasilia,” modern version of Virgin Mary challenges God and does not want her son to be the chosen one. The phrase “Mirror safe, unredeemed” suggests that she craves for seclusion in order to evade the reflection in God’s eye mirror. She also feels that she is reborn with power and glory:

Mirror safe, unredeemed

By the dove’s annihilation,
The glory
The power, the glory. (21-24)

The wife in “The Courier” also rejects the sluggish image as a devoted wife and wants dangerous exposure by assimilating within her the elemental forces of seething sea:

A disturbance in the mirror,
The sea shattering its gray one ---

Love, love, my season. (11-13)

“Ariel” is saturated with a strong sense of freedom emanating from the beginning till the very end of the poem. “Stasis in the darkness” is the beginning point; no light or motion on the moor is visible until at the horizon “the substanceless blue” sky of freedom triggers the distinct motion by the “Pour of tor and distances” (1-3). At a distance, a craggy hill appears as if crowned in this dream-like situation with a sacrificial altar, a semblance of purgatorial fire out of which she, urging herself to move ahead in her already transformed image of “God’s lioness” emerges (4). She declares how she has acquired the elemental and animalistic power of a lioness to turn her passive state into activity, to leave behind all her past images. Annamma Joseph remarks, “The transforming ritual of purging and fusing leading to new birth, conceived . . . as a ritual leading to death, is presented here as journey from stasis in darkness through a nightmarish landscape” (67). The poetic persona starts her heroic journey on the horse back like a legendary hero in classical treatise at dawn assimilating within her the power of Ariel, a blithe spirit of fire and air from whom she receives kinesis and moves from submission to assertion. She is reborn as rebellious “White Godiva,” a masquerading form of the mythic White Goddess of Love and Death, who defies her husband. In her new identity, she says:

White
Godiva, I unpeel –
Dead hands, dead stringencies. (19-21)

Like White Godiva, she has laid bare her true self by unpeeling her “dead hands” and “dead stringencies.” The sea image with its glittering surface

is the mirror of nature in which she sees her true face, not of a nurturing mother but of White Goddess:

And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.

.....

And I
Am the arrow. (23-27)

The image of sea-glass is quite significant because it reflects both aspects of woman's existence as Plath draws a comparison between sea and woman: "Like a deep woman, it hid a good deal; it had many faces, many delicate, terrible veils. It spoke of miracles and distances; if it could court, it could also kill" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 117). She is released from the mothering role, transformed an arrow, a power, launching forth into the sky and child's cry does not melt her heart as she says, "The child's cry / Melts in the wall" (24-25). Annamm Joseph remarks regarding arrow image, which is "a symbol of self assertion, speed, effectiveness and the sharpness and sharpness and definiteness direction. It marks the victory over suffering and death; yet the destination is death and rebirth" (68).

Thus, mirror plays a significant role to show the drama of psychic-striptease. Changing incessantly from one identity to another to wear all sorts of masks ranging from a faithful wife to a glamorous mannequin, a sort of antipathy is aroused in psyche of female protagonist, who with the tempo of self-realization, hopes for rebirth and resurrection. However, the metamorphoses of the self in the dark dungeon of mirror are painful, but the self willingly suffers this poignancy because she sees the looming gleam of refreshed self. Through the transparency of the mirror, the whole drama of self-realization is clear before our eyes culminating in the triumphant emergence of female self as a lioness, a terrible fish, Phoenix and airy spirit, golden baby,

Lady Godiva and Moon Goddess, capable of shattering the mirror of this patriarchal world. Dr. Neslihan Ekmekçioğlu remarks on the significance and relevance of mirror imagery in Plath's poetry:

. . . in Sylvia Plath's poetry, surfaces which are capable of reflecting images from within such as the mirror, the sea, the lake, the window, the eye, the moon, the bell jar, the crystal ball and the polished stones, indeed, stand for her desperate search for her own identity and the reality of her inner psyche The reflecting surfaces which are used in her poetry become transparent and reveal a threatening world behind them, which can pull her in or drown her or annihilate the vision of the self. Reflecting surfaces demonstrate both the search for self in its multiple disguises and the disintegration of the self into pieces, and finally the rebirth of her true self.

Hence, the mirrors in Plath's poetry reflect the male point of view regarding woman, "a perfect reflection of feminine ideal in male eyes" (Freedman). However, Plath undermines the imposed version of feminine identity and exhibits the persona's genuine struggle during her interior journey to release herself from bondage of idealized femininity through the incarnation of a self, which is aggressively self-assertive. Linda K. Bundtzen suggests the significance and relevance of "mirror imagery" in Plath's poetry:

"All of these mirror relationships between woman and her archetypes of feminine perfection – the youthful beauty, the virgin, the ideal, housekeeper, the sexually prized harem wife, and the all-good, all-giving mother – are brutally mocked and tested by Plath to discover what truths about female psychology they might convey" (227) since powers are within and not without. Annas Nin also writes, "I had to learn where the roots were: / and they were in me" (quoted by Stewart 107). At last, the all powerful and transformed female self, with an awareness of another

world, returns to declare her triumphant emergence with dangerous exposure:

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And eat men like air. (82-84)

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Notes

- I. 'Semiotic realm' represents the pre-linguistic stage of imaginary, which is free from the "ism" and the rules of Symbolic Order, i.e. the *Law of the Father*. This regime of 'semiotic' and 'imaginary' is called "Chora," a receptacle or womb where nothing is static and fixed in a certain formula rather governed by drives: death and birth drives, the elixir of life. The implication is that a recourse towards semiotic is a return to the transformative creative power that solves the delimita of

identity. (For further details, see in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* by Wilfred L. Guerin, et al.).

Rajani Sharma, M.A. M. Phil.
HNB Garhwal University,
Srinagar
Uttrakhand