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The Reversal of Gender Conventions : A Select Study of Christina Georgina Rossetti and Sylvia Plath's Poetics

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Abstract:

The Present Paper is an attempt of comparative study on the select works of the British Woman Poet, Christina Georgina Rossetti and the American Woman Poet, Sylvia Plath. The purpose of the present paper is to enlighten the conceptions on how Christina Georgina Rossetti reveals her strong, independent and powerful personality through her poems and how her personality gets reflected in Sylvia Plath's Poems. During the Age of Queen Victoria, women were brought into a circle and they had to live upto that circle. Men were unsympathetic towards women, considered them as an object and not as a human being. Women were restricted to act upon their personal rights to establish their identity. Through the medium of poetry, Christina Georgina Rossetti steps out of her circumstances and feelings. She expresses the pressurized life of Victorian Women and raised her voice against the ideology of Victorians through her works. The great value of her work lies in the betrayal appears most cruelly and terribly in the relationship between man and woman. Her multi-layered structure of her poems adds power to her as a Poet. Women writers addresses feminist issues in various literatures. The paper attempts to explore the reflection of Christina's independent personality in Sylvia Plath's poems. Plath is one of the pioneer of popularizing Confessional poetry and she is considered the first American Woman Poet, who put her personal sufferings and miseries on her writings. Like Christina, Plath in her works, expresses her distress, mental and emotional pain to establish her strong personality. As a Confessional writer, Plath reveals her bitter personal experiences in a symbolic language. The focus of the paper is to explore how Christina and Sylvia Plath reversed the gender conventions by taking poetry as a medium to make their voice everlasting and no longer be ignored.

Keywords: Victorian ideology, Reversal of Gender conventions, Confessional Poetry

Introduction:

During the Age of Queen Victoria, women were brought into a circle and they had to live up to that circle. Men were unsympathetic towards women. Men considered women as an object and not as a human being. Women were restricted to act upon their personal rights to establish their identity. Being a woman of the Victorian era, Christina Georgina Rossetti took poetry as a medium to step out of her circumstances and feelings. Like all Victorian women, Christina led a pressured life. But, still her poetry is being discussed by many critics. She established her strong, independent and powerful personality through her poems by using symbolic language. The paper attempts to explore the reflection of Christina's independent personality in Sylvia Plath's poems. Plath is one of the pioneer of popularizing Confessional poetry and she is considered the first American Woman Poet, who put her personal sufferings and miseries on her writings. Like Christina, Plath in her works, expresses her distress, mental and emotional pain to establish her strong personality. As a Confessional writer, Plath reveals her bitter personal experiences in a symbolic language.

Christina: Reversed the great tradition of Dante and Petrarch

Her sonnets revealed her love in a different way and she reversed the traditional pattern of love sonnets written by Dante and Petrarch. In her Sonnet sequence, Christina creates a unique voice. She neglects the tradition of considering female as a mere object of man's affection, but the woman as speaker expressing her desire and frustration to her male lover. She takes the male tradition and expresses it through a female voice. Dante and Petrarch used Beatrice and Laura as a silent object of their great love Sonnets. But, Christina attempts to reverse the role of the speaker and the silent object. Through her Sonnets, Christina not only answers the male poet, but creates an unique voice by reversing the great tradition of Dante and Petrarch.

Through "Monno Innominata": A sonnet of sonnets, Christina expresses her deep love in a different way. She combines the erotic love and spiritual love in her sonnets to give voice to a female consciousness. Each and every sonnet has two epigraphs in Italian form, one by Dante and one by Petrarch. Christina's headnote to the sequence explains that Beatrice and Laura lack tenderness. In the beginning, her Sonnets express how she recalls her love.

“Come back to me, who wait and wait for you” (1)

“O love, my world is you” (7)

The above lines are taken from Sonnet 1, reveals her love for her lover. At the same time, she is not confident enough in her hope. It is evident in the following lines from Sonnet 1,

“My hope hangs waning, waxing, like a moon” (11)

The act of recalling her love continues in Sonnet 2, as

“I wish I could remember that first day,

First hour, first moment of your meeting me” (1-2)

The following line from Sonnet 4 reveals her zenith of love,

“for one is both and both one in love” (11)

It is evident that she struggles with the meaning of her love. A conflict can be seen in her early sonnets. She addresses this power struggle not to glorify the love for each other, but to her relationship with God, which can be realized by the readers in her later Sonnets.

“I cannot love you if I love not him

I cannot love him if I love not you” (13-14)

The above lines from Sonnet 6 expresses her love of God over man.

“I charge you at the judgement make it plain

My love of you was life and not a breath” (13-14)

The above lines from Sonnet 11 expresses the speaker’s love for God. The domination of spiritual love over physical love can be seen through her sonnets. She strongly neglects the conventional role of women and the treatment of women as the silent object of male poets. Hence, Christina creates the role of a woman lover as a person in her own right. Indirectly, she shows herself as an example for the women writers, who love to write love Sonnets to create an awesome change in their writings. Many of Christina’s poems reveal the tales

of broken relationships and indirect mourning of lost love. In the poem 'Song', Christina uses parallelism in the following lines,

“Haply I may remember
And haply may forget” (15-16).

She attempts to show the indifference that the poet has for remembering and forgetting. 'Song' articulates the indifference towards her supposed beloved. She asks her lover not to be disappointed by her death and at the same time, the speaker has the sense of happiness in her inability to remember her beloved.

Like most Victorian poets, Christina was pre-occupied with death, the instability of passion, relationships and love. She was forced to be under the conventional customs and habits. Because of the loneliness, depression and frustration in love, her poetry is still being discussed by the critics. Through poetry, she has taken control of the male perspective and given independence to the female subject. Thus, she took poetry as a medium to express her powerful personality, in order to make her voice everlasting and no longer be ignored.

Christina's bold personality echoed in Sylvia Plath's poems

As a consequence of male oriented literary tradition, women writers addressed feminist issues in various literatures. Christina's bold personality echoed in Sylvia Plath's poems. Plath too, took poetry as a medium to establish her independent personality. As a confessional writer, her frankness is evident in her writings. Her damn courage can be seen through her poetry, which is similar to Christina's writings.

Similar to Christina, Plath too led a pressured life. Also, she has been credited with advancing the genre of Confessional poetry. She had a strict father and his authoritarian attitudes and his death drastically defined her relationships and her poems. Her marriage affair was also not a memorable event for her. She wrote most of her poems in a depression. She used violent imagery in her poems.

In "Daddy", she talks about her tyrannical father. Like other poems of her, this poem is deeply personal. It can also be read with the perspective of historical events like war. Both the father figure and the husband figure are seen in relation to the brutality of fascism.

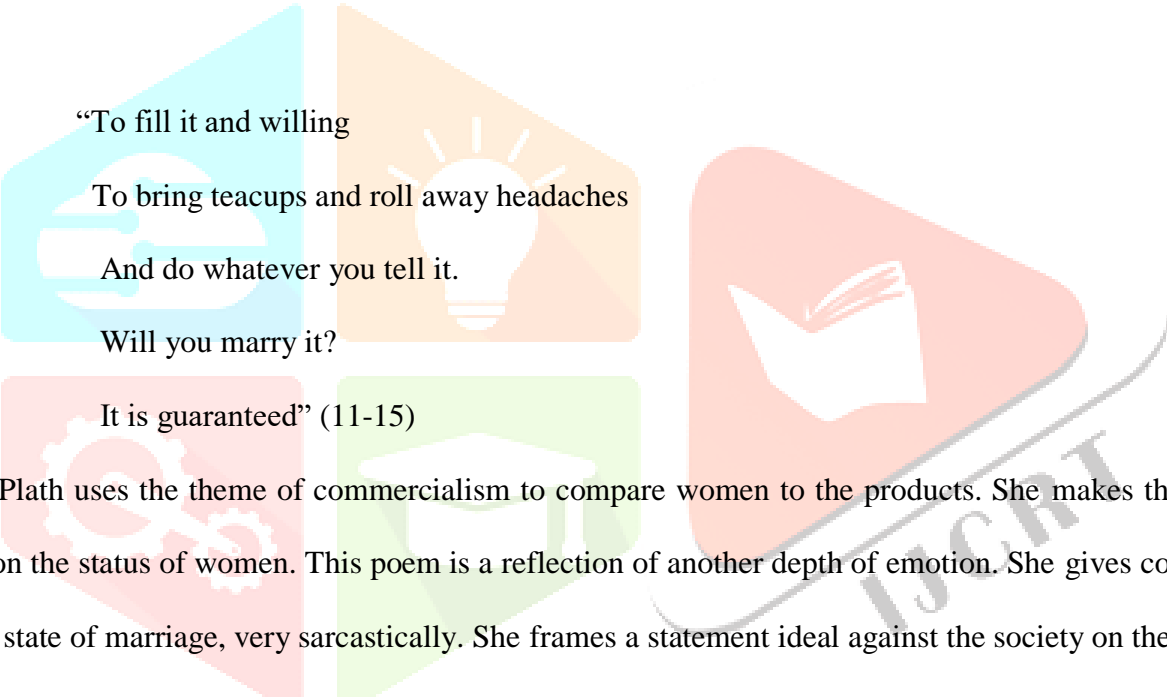
“I have always been scared of you” (41)

The above line from “Daddy” obviously shows the tyrannical attitude of her father.

“Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (80)

From the above line, it is evident that she expresses her frankness about her father to the readers. Almost, she expresses her father as an evil figure. It is a terrible poem and one of the most nakedly confessional poems ever written. It is a poem of total rejection.

In “The Applicant”, she describes woman in a satirical way. She objectifies the woman in this poem.



“To fill it and willing
To bring teacups and roll away headaches
And do whatever you tell it.
Will you marry it?

It is guaranteed” (11-15)

Thus, Plath uses the theme of commercialism to compare women to the products. She makes the readers to think on the status of women. This poem is a reflection of another depth of emotion. She gives commentaries on the state of marriage, very sarcastically. She frames a statement ideal against the society on the function of woman. Her “Mirror” is a complicated poem, where she expresses a fact that when humans love something, it appears more beautiful and when it is disliked by them, it seems uglier, unlike the mirror, which shows things exactly as they are.

“I am not cruel, only truthful” (5)

The above line from “Mirror”, reveals how mirror shows what it sees and takes nothing else in account. Through this poem, the speaker wants to convey the message that mirror may change into a lake, but it does not seem to age as time passes, unlike the woman who sees herself aging in her reflection in the water. But, the effects of passing time may be the source of her troubles, which she has experienced. Similarly, in many of her poems, Plath expresses her frankness to the readers.

Conclusion:

Thus, the present paper attempts to manifests on how Christina and Plath step out of the conventional woman role to establish their identity by taking poetry as a medium to express it. By reversing the gender conventions, they achieved success in making their voice everlasting and no longer be ignored.

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