Sylvia Plath'in Mona Lisa Gülümsemesi: Çarpıtılmış Gerçekliğin Yıkımı

The Mona Lisa Smile Of Sylvia Plath: Destroying The Distorted Picture Of Reality

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ÖZET

Eserleri ve kimliği adeta bir fantezi ve mite dönüştürülen Amerikan şair ve yazar Sylvia Plath, edebiyat dünyası tarafından "deli dahi" olarak damgalanmıştır. Dolayısı ile Sylvia Plath ismi şizofreni, delilik, travma ve belirsizilik ile özdeşleşmektedir ve sadece yaşamı değil eserleri de "Plath miti'nin" anahtar kelimeleri olarak adlandırılabilinecek bu kavramlar üzerinden okunmaktadır. Oysa okuyucuya Mona Lisa'nın ünlü tarif edilemeyen gülümsemesini andıran ve belirsizlikler üzerine kurulu gibi görünen bu karmaşık durum objektif bir lens aracılığı ile incelendiğinde okuyucu tamamiyle farklı bir tablo ile karşılaştırmaktadır çünkü Plath'in eserlerinde ısrarla vurguladığı ve eleştirmelerin otobiografik olarak yorumladığı mutluluk ve mutsuzlukla örülü gel gitler yazarın şizofrenik algılama biçemini değil Soğuk Savaş söyleminin sonucu olan hayatın ta kendisini yansıtmaktadır. Dolayısı ile eserleri de sadece Plath'in hayatını değil Soğuk Savaş döneminin sosyal, politik ve psikolojik travmalarını yaşayan tüm bireyleri yansıtmaktadır. Bu çalışmada bu güne kadar Plath üzerine yazılan eserlerin ve yazara yöneltilen eleştirilerin merkezine yerleştirilen "delilik" üzerine kurgulanmış senaryoların karşısında Plath'in politik söylemini merkeze alan bir görüş sunulmaktadır. Plath'in politik duruşu ve eserlerinin yaratım süreci Amerikan Soğuk Savaş söylemlerine paralel olarak incelemekte ve entellektüel bir kadın kimliğinin ve bu kimliğin sonucu olan eserlerin kültürel bir ikona dönüştürülme adına ne denli çarpıtıldığı vurgulanmaktadır. Bu güne kadar Sylvia Plath üzerine yazılan pek çok eserde göze çarpan kadın yaratıcılığının ilham kaynağı olarak niteldirilen şizofrenik dünya, Soğuk Savaş dönemi yazılan eserlerin incelenmesi ile bir kurgulamayı açığa çıkarmaktadır. Sonuç olarak Plath'in deliliğin sonucu olarak olarak ortaya çıktığı iddia edilen eserleri yapay kültürel ikonlar yaratma adına feda edilen eserlere dönüştürülmektedir. Öte yandan Plath'in eserlerinin edebi gücü feda edilen kadın yaratıcılığını ısrarla vurgulamakta ve dönemin tarihsel gerçeklerine ışık tutmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sylvia Plath, Soğuk Savaş, Plath Miti, Plath endüstrisi, Amerikan Çalışmaları.

Çalışmanın Türü: Araştırma

ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath is one of the few authors who has been posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Plath's exceptional literary career is not limited with that. When twentieth-century literary history is examined, it becomes patent that no writer has created such an enormous impact as Sylvia Plath. Furthermore, no writer or poet has been as misunderstood as in the case of Plath. In addition, no writer or poet has been labeled often as "schizophrenic" or "mad" by scholars or researchers who do not have the slightest education in psychology or psychopathology. Therefore, the works written on Plath, or the studies that have been made on Plath must be carefully read in order to prevent reading her works under false lights. In relation to that Plath's works must be read solely as literary works that are part of the twentieth century literature, not fantasies. In relation, the myths that have been created concerning Plath or the readings that start from the death of Plath are not only the false lights of literary critics but also of the ideology of Cold War America that has tried to turn Plath into a problematic woman. As a result, although the literary critics have tended to create many Plaths, including the psychotic, the divorced, the dead, the mad, the divided, and the schizoid, as a matter of fact there is only one Sylvia Plath, who crystallizes not only the traumas of her generation but also various literary works as a response to the ideology of her age. Although Plath's life-story is not exceptional but exemplary, her story would be turned in to a myth, an exceptional fairy tale mired in gossip, lies and the defamation of the literary significance of her works. In the end, it would be unable to prevent the appearance of the Plath industry that aimed at re-creating her story again and again. As a result, almost all of the early works on Plath, including the biographies and criticism of the poems and the prose, have attempted to recreate a story, a myth, which has turned into an industry that focuses on a Sylvia Plath, who has been defined in terms of the dead father or the lost husband. Therefore, absence, as a key word of interpreting Plath, has postulated the transformation of a genius into a "mad woman in the attic" who has become solely associated with the "image of an Oedipal victim." Hence, the intention of re-creating different stories of Plath resulted in a birth of "a myth" and "the Plath myth" has tried to reinvent the life story of Plath and undermine her works. This study focuses on the conventional claims concerning Sylvia Plath and her works that have naturally intermingled with the theory that her works were mainly built upon the life-story of Plath encompassing despair, trauma, and schizophrenia, and postulates that Plath's works not only encompass pessimism but also happiness, achievement, and power. This study encapsulates studies on Plath that are crucial to decipher the Plath myth that has followed the interpretation of the works of Plath like a shadow. Hence, it focuses on the most prominent and paradoxical issues about Sylvia Plath, her life, and the creation process involved in her work. The idea of the Mona Lisa Smile of Sylvia Plath encompasses the death of Sylvia Plath, conventionally interpreted as a tragic suicide of a schizophrenic woman, which is the starting point of almost all of the Plath studies. Therefore the analysis of key readings on Plath tries to highlight how the ending of her story has

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been fabricated by her family, her critics and scholars. This study also analyzes the political voice of Plath that has been ignored by most of the Plath scholars. Although Plath achieved and maintained a unique and evolving political voice, both in her poetry and prose, under the name of "madness" this unique style has been read under the misleading light of Plath's biography retold by different Plath scholars. As a result, in Plath studies, the starting point can never simply be the criticism of the works of Plath, but biased quartet composed of Ted Hughes, Otto Plath and the mad woman in the attic. The point is her political voice again remains absent in their commentary. Furthermore, even Plath herself is absent. This kind of absence of the female voice resulted in the danger of reading her works solely from a little picture that cannot postulate new interpretations or fields of inquiry. Plath also highlights the problem of reading her works. However an objective analysis of the "Plath myth" offers striking answers to the dilemma of the Plath scholars and readers, who are lost in the mazes of subjective Plath biographies and literary critics, under the name of the 'Plath myth.' It can be assumed that Plath disproves the interpretations of Sylvia Plath as somehow political, or as someone whose works should be read without any association with political commentary.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, Cold War, the Plath myth, the Plath industry, American studies.
The type of research: Research

The best teacher is experience
and not through someone's
distorted point of view.
Jack Kerouac, On the Road.

Da Vinci's famous painting "Mona Lisa" is one of the best works that highlights the "case" of Sylvia Plath. The word "case" must be used while defining Plath as a *female* intellectual, who has been the subject of hundreds of works from various scholars and researchers around the world[1] and whose name has been transformed into a myth as a result of the Cold War ideology. It can be assumed that the word "case" has become naturally intermingled with the name Sylvia Plath as the interpretation of her works are mainly built upon the life-story of Plath herself which has been defined as a "case" encompassing not only despair, trauma, sorrow, powerlessness and schizophrenia but also happiness, achievement and power.[2] Therefore the name Sylvia Plath has become the symbol of both positive and negative contributions to literature. As Jacqueline Rose endorses,

> *Sylvia Plath, haunts our culture. She is for many a shadowy figure whose presence draws on and compels. What she may be asking for is never clear, although it seems highly unlikely that she is asking for what she gets. Execrated and idolized, Plath hovers between the furthest poles of positive and negative appraisal; she hovers in the space of what is most extreme, most violent, about appraisal, valuation, about moral and literary assessment as such.(Rose, 2001: 1")*[3]

However, it has been ignored that the two opposite poles formulated for Plath are also the key poles of human life: the smile and the tears.

"It has often been remarked that commentary on Plath tends to split into two antagonistic camps. There are those who pathologise Plath, freely diagnose her as schizophrenic or psychotic, read her writings as symptom or warning, something we should both admire and avoid"(Rose, 2001: 3) and it is at this point the Mona Lisa Smile starts to show itself. It is evident that the hot debates on Plath, about her life and works illustrate either a deep pessimism, or an admirable optimism, which are the sources of this smile. The social context of this enigmatic smile has always been left missing, because the Plath industry[4]

[1] Most of the biographies and studies on Plath do not achieve the postulation of a new vision in understanding her literary works. That is the reason why Tim Kendall in the preface of his work on Plath asks: "Why does the world need yet another book on Sylvia Plath? Here is a writer who has attracted more attention, and from a broader readership, than any other post-war English-language poet. Plath has become an industry. Yet her popularity has not always helped to enhance our understanding of her work"(Kendall, 2001: preface). Kendall's claims on the works on Plath is quite right, as dozens of biographies and literary criticism studies have appeared only as a repetition of either the previous ones or a counter attack against the Plath industry. Therefore, new insights into the Plath criticism have been achieved by very few works.

[2] As Judith Kroll argues, "There is a similar danger of missing the meaning of her poetry in regarding her themes and imagery as illustrations of pathological symptoms, as if what is of significance in her poetry were reducible to the presentation of a case history"(Kroll, 1978: 5).

[3] Rose's work is the first-book length study that questions the Plath myth. It is one of the most significant studies on Plath that underlines how Plath and her works have been shunned from political interpretation.

[4] Plath industry is composed of Plath scholars around the world whose works are mired in the biography of Plath and the relation between her life and her works. For further reading see Robin Peel (2002). *Writing Back Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics*. Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press.

is so mired in the biography and the relation between her life and her works, they have unconsciously missed the frame, the ideological context of that smile.

First of all, it should be mentioned that, Sylvia Plath has turned into a poet and a writer who has become a member of the "myth and Symbol school" in American studies. When one thinks about 1960's American studies, the motive was creating "a usable past."[5] That kind of action implicitly resulted from the idea that America could be the winner of the Cold War on condition that it could achieve the building of a socially strong nation. Throughout the Cold War years, a socially strong nation meant having the strongest family ties and the finest technological products to support that social life. One of the best examples of this is the famous "Kitchen Debate" between Khrushchev and Nixon. The two leaders are contesting each other over the technological products of their countries. Therefore, the ideology of Cold War politics focused on the 'home' and the 'family,' supported by the highest and finest social standards.[6] However, it is evident that technology was not enough to create the ideal nation. A cultural history that was missing in American nation was needed. Unlike the European nations, especially the mother country, the United States lacked a rich cultural and historical past. The only way to solve this problem was by creating cultural icons that helped the building of a historically and socially strong nation. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the works of the Cold War years mainly highlighted American nation's attempt to rewrite the story of their culture and the case of Sylvia Plath has a strong parallelism with this attitude of the Cold War years, as she is just like the Virgin land upon which different stories have been written again and again and again by different people. In relation, Henry Nash Smith's study, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, which appeared as a product of the Cold War years, illustrates the parallelism between Plath and the idea of the Virgin Land, the American West, and the struggle to turn it into a 'myth,' a 'symbol.'[7] As Smith asserts, "… a whole generation of historians took over this hypothesis [Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the frontier in American History] and rewrote American history in terms of it … [which is] the most familiar interpretation of American past"(Smith, 1970: 3-4). Just like the American West, Sylvia Plath was turned into "a myth…a fantasy"(Rose, 2001: 5). In addition to Nash Smith, Leo Marx's work, which was published one year after Plath's death, *The Machine in the Garden. Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* also has a strong parallelism with the Plath 'myth.' In his work, Marx argues that "[t]he pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America, ever since the age of discovery and it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination"(Marx, 1967 :3). The situation is the same for some Plath scholars. They found a 'Virgin Land,' an un-inscribed territory, a tabula rasa upon which they wrote different stories. Hence, just like Marx quotes Thoreau's phrase that the American nation "constructed a fate, an Atropos,"(Thoreau: Marx, 1967: 354) a fate was also constructed for Plath. As Susan Van Dyne disputes,

> *Because the poems and novel that have made Plath's name came to almost all her readers as posthumous events, her work has inevitably been read through the irrevocable, ineradicable and finally enigmatic fact of Plath's suicide. The challenge for her biographers has been to puzzle out the relationship not merely of her life to her art, but of her art to her death.(Van Dyne, 2006: 3)*

She continues that, "the credibility of the figure of Plath as psychotic, wounded, devious, narcissistic or death-driven does not lie with the objectivity of the witnesses the biographer draws upon, but comes from the multiple sites within culture that give shape and meaning to women's experience *as* story"(Van Dyne, 2006: 16). Van Dyne's final sentence is quite significant in the sense that the culture that gives shape to Plath is also the one that gives shape to the 'Virgin Land,' the frontier. In relation to the 'Virgin Land,' Marx also highlights another myth which is famously juxtaposed with the 'Virgin' in Henry Adams's work: "The Dynamo and the Virgin." Marx comments on the issue.

> *The Education of Henry Adams is one of the most American of books. Adams uses the opposition between the Virgin and the Dynamo to figure an all-embracing conflict: a clash between past and present, unity and diversity, love and power. In*

[5] During that period in American culture, through creating myths and cultural symbols, American nation tried to build a past which would have the power to cope European history. For further reading see Bruce Kuklick (1972). Myth and Symbol in American Studies. *American Quarterly*. Vol. 24, (4), 435-450.

[6] For further reading see Elaine Tyler May (1999). *Homeward Bound. American Families in the Cold War Era*. Basic Books.

[7] Even the title of the book includes the words 'myth' and 'symbol.' In the case of Plath, the word 'myth' has been used by her scholars to define her literary status in America.

> *this Manichean fashion he marshals all conceivable values. On one side he lines up heaven, beauty, religion, reproduction, on the other: hell, utility, science, and production.(Marx, 1967: 347)*

In relation to Marx's comments on the juxtaposition between the pastoral ideal, the Virgin, and the Dynamo that signifies the production, it becomes clear that through creating a conflicting case, Sylvia Plath was also turned into a myth. She both encapsulates the story of the Virgin Land as an Oedipal victim upon which anything can be inscribed, and the Dynamo, that derives its power from the story of the absent husband Ted Hughes and the lost father Otto Plath who empowers her works. The point is the fact that, without the Dynamo, the male absence, Plath is absent, as she cannot be Virgin without the assistance of patriarchal discourse.[8] It is evident that Marx's interpretation of the Virgin and the Dynamo is also the story behind the Plath myth. First the Plath myth is mainly based upon the clash between her real past and the attempt to create a usable past that aims at recreating a story for the present time. Second, the Plath myth encapsulates both love, her love of her husband and father, and the power that resulted from that patriarchal energy. In conclusion, it might be argued that the Plath myth was basically targeted toward re-creating a story for Plath, in order to turn it into a usable past. It can be asserted that the name Sylvia Plath has been turned into one of the cultural products and symbols of the usable past of America. As a part of the "myth and symbol school" in American studies, Sylvia Plath naturally becomes a cultural icon labeled as "the Marilyn Monroe of the literati"(Rose, 2001: 29).

In addition to the studies that appeared during the Cold War years, such as Smith's and Marx's works, Alan Trachtenberg's study *Brooklyn Bridge Fact and Symbol* intensifies the parallelism between the pictures of Sylvia Plath and the Brooklyn Bridge as cultural icons. Trachtenberg's first sentence is "Brooklyn Bridge belongs first to the eye"(Trachtenberg, 1979: 3). Once one has thought about Plath, the picture is the same. One immediately envisions a woman, who belongs first to the eye. Before the quotations from her works, the reader envisions the image of Plath with her head in the oven, or the Plath with the absent husband Hughes and the picture of Assia Wevill with whom her husband betrayed Plath.[9] As a symbol, like the Brooklyn Bridge, she "was not merely a creation, but a growth"(L. Marx 8). Since her death in 1963, the debates on Plath have continued to grow more and more, and after each work she becomes a heroine of a different story. As Trachtenberg quotes from Francis Grund's work, *The Americans*,

> *The Americans entered the wilderness as masters determined to subdue it; and not as children of nature, nursed and brought up in its bosom. They could not at first love what was not theirs; and when it became theirs, they had already changed its face.(qtd. Grund: Marx, 1967: 6)*[10]

It is evident that just like Trachtenberg's allusion to the tendency of the American style, through Grund's sharp criticism, the Brooklyn Bridge, "an emblem of the eternal, providing a passage between the ideal and, the transitory sensations of history, a way to unify them"(Trachtenberg, 1979: 145) acts as a perfect metaphor of the Plath myth that acts as a bridge between Plath and a usable past for the American literature. Like the Plath myth, the Brooklyn Bridge "does not wait to be found, but to be created. That is, it represents not an external "thing," but an internal process, an act of consciousness"(Trachtenberg, 1979: 146).

It is evident that Sylvia Plath became a myth that was created by the dominant discourse of her time.[11] The power of the myth is felt so strongly that it creates a problem. As Robin Peel underlines,

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[8]Simone de Beauvoir in her introduction to *The Second Sex* argues that, "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being"(Beauvoir, 1997: 16). Beauvoir's argument successfully suits the case of Plath, a literal case, which has been turned into a pathological one.

[9] The front cover of Yahuda Koren and Eliat Negev's work on Plath, Wevill and Hughes includes the photos of all of them. Their work *Lover of Unreason. Assia Wevill, Sylvia Plath's Rival and Ted Hughes Doomed Love* is an illuminating work as it is the first study that enlightens how Plath's works were destroyed by Hughes and Wevill and the traumatic last days of Plath. For further reading see Koren, Yahuda and Eliat Negev (2007). *Lover of Unreason. Asia Wevill, Sylvia Plath's Rival and Ted Hughes's Doomed Love*. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers.

[10] For further reading see Francis Joseph Grund (2007). *The Americans in Their Moral, Social, and Political Relations*. Ingram Pub Services.

[11]As Dougles Miller and Marian Nowak, in their critical study, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* mentions, "Everybody got married in the fifties, or at least it was a supreme sign of personal health and well-being to be engaged in the social act of marriage and family raising"(Miller and Nowak, 1977: 147). It is not difficult to surmise that the dominant ideology of the time encouraged the entrapment of women at home. For further reading on the traumatic elements of female life see Dougles Miller and Marian Nowak (1977). *The Fifties: The WayWe Really Were*. New York: Double Day.

> *The problem is that as new readers encounter her work there is enormous pressure on them to interpret "specific time" and place in terms of Plath's known life story, as if she were a character from some epic drama such known life story, such as Gone With the Wind. So much general reporting has discussed Plath's work as the interiorizing of experience dictated by the politics of personal relationships, that other possibilities have been overshadowed. This tendency has been fuelled by the succession of biographies, newspaper articles, documentaries, and films which explore her life. The Plath industry tends to distort Plath's own writing, for the endless discussion of her relationships make it difficult to locate the published work in other frames, in other contexts.(Peel, 2002 :18)*

At this point, it is not difficult to surmise that the myth of Plath started with her death which was turned into a romantic suicide that could be retold, re-read, and recreated again and again and again. The contradictory criticism on Plath is based upon the fact that it both encapsulates the strong emphasis on regeneration the optimism in her works and the despair and pessimism.[12] In relation, the Plath myth mainly focuses on the story after Plath's death and the starting point of the myth is of course the theory of "the lost father" and "the absent husband." Also it is equally easy to see why her works have been interpreted as the product of a psychotic woman, who took nourishment from sickness. For instance, in his 1972 review of *Winter Trees* entitled "The Cult of Plath" Webster Schott describes Plath as the "high priestess of the confessional poem, master of the poem as intimate weapon, snake lady of misery in the literature of ultimate control … "(Schott, 1972: 3).He further comments,

> *Sylvia Plath was a sick woman who made her art of her sickness. One or two of her poems will be read a long time but absent from her work are joy, glory, strong love, any sense of the interdependence of human relationships and the infinite alternatives of life. Some young people, having limited experience, need literature to help them feel bad, and people, having limited experience, and they will celebrate Plath for a while.(Schott, 1972: 3)*

Apparently, sickness is the keyword of the Plath myth that caused reading of her works under false precepts. As Karen Jackson Ford notes,

> *Initially, the myth was based on the terrible precedent set by Sylvia Plath, and the tragic way in which her life and her art complete each other. Elizabeth Hardwick, who admires Plath's writing and is appalled by her story, has this to say: "She, the poet, is frighteningly there all the time. Orestes rages but Aeschylus lives to be almost seventy. Sylvia Plath, however, is both heroine and author; when the curtain goes down, it is her own dead body there on the stage, sacrificed to her plot"(Ford, 1997: 109).*

Therefore, it is not difficult to surmise the political discourses in her works are altered by the voice of "an Oedipal victim"(Rose, 2001: 13) which is intensified by the sense of victimization caused by the loss of the husband. The result of that kind of a picture is the labeling of Plath as a mad poet who took nourishment from her madness and whose works must be read in terms of madness. Therefore, it is not a surprise that one of the most well-known early biographies of Plath, by Edward Butscher, bears the title *Sylvia Plath. Method and Madness.* Throughout Butscher's work, he defines Plath in terms of madness, labeling her as a "bitch-goddess"(Butscher, 1976). He uses Plath's interest on *The White Goddess: a Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* by Robert Graves.[13] The mythological figure of the White Goddess is turned by Butscher into the bitch-goddess to define Plath. Furthermore, for short intervals, he uses the word "mask" to define Plath as a woman who always wore different masks throughout her life.[14] Therefore, Sylvia Plath is labeled as mad.[15]

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[12] The Mona Lisa Smile can also be seen in the photos of Sylvia Plath. The works that interpret Plath as a successful creative mind use Plath's photo that was taken at the Quadigras Dance at Smith College on May 1954 or other photos of Plath that illustrates her optimism (Plath, 2000, Helle, 2007, Gill, 2006). In the photo Plath is being given a rose. On the other hand, works by Anne Stevenson, Edward Butscher, Connie Ann Kirk, use different photos of Plath that were taken at either on a gloomy Cambridge day or while Plath was sitting next to Hughes. The interesting point is that the photo originally includes Ted Hughes, but writers and publishers intentionally omit him. The suffocating England weather is the background of the picture and Plath seems thoughtful. In conclusion, even the photos used on the front cover of Plath works illustrate the fact that she either deserves the optimistic female figure or the pessimistic one.

[13] *The White Goddess: a Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* by Robert Graves is one of the most significant studies on poetry in order to understand the poetic power of Plath whom was an admirer of that book. In his work graves argues the existence of a European Deity, which is "the White Goddess of Birth, Love and Death" that is inspired and takes strength from the moon. It must be underlined that the moon, as a metaphor, was used frequently not only in Plath's poems but also in *The Bell Jar*. For further reading see Robert Graves (1977).The White Goddess: *a Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*. New York: Douglas McIntyre Ltd.

[14]The answer of Bustcher's portrayal of a socially problematic woman who wore various masks is given by R.D. Laing, whom was also read by Plath. He claims that "A man without a mask' is indeed very rare. On even doubts the possibility of such a man.

First of all, one should think of the social forces that triggered madness from different sources. It is understood that madness is a term used for Plath as it has the potential to intensify heated debate on Plath's life and its reflection in her works all serving the ends of the Plath industry. That kind of an idea is supported by Elizabeth Wurtzel, who begins a chapter in her New York Times best-seller novel, *The Prozac Nation*, by quoting Plath's poem "Elm."[16] In this chapter, she comments on the issue of madness with the following words,

> *I have studiously tried to avoid ever using the word madness to describe my condition. Now and again, the word slips out, but I hate it. Madness [emphasis added] is too glamorous a term to convey what happens to most people who are losing their minds. That word is too exciting, too literary, too interesting in its connotations, to convey the boredom, the slowness, the dreariness, the dampness of depression.(Wurtzel, 1995: 294)*

She further states that "Depression is such an uncharismatic disease, so much the opposite of the lively vibrance that one associates with madness"(Wurtzel, 1995: 295). Therefore, it becomes evident why Butscher and many other biographers have insisted on using the word *mad* while defining the life-story of Plath. The identical tone is evidently seen in Anne Stevenson's biography *Bitter Fame A Life of Sylvia Plath* that is one of the most polemical works on Plath.

Stevenson's biography of Plath has an inner voice of Olywn Hughes, the sister of Ted Hughes, who took part in every step of the writing process. The book says nothing new on Plath, but emphasizes the narcissistic, psychotic nature of Plath that forced Hughes to fall in love with another woman. In order to justify this picture, Stevenson prefers to start her work with the famous lines of "Lady Lazarus"[17] that refers to reading Plath in terms of death and suicide. Like Stevenson, A. Alvarez in his work, *The Savage God. A Study of Suicide* followed the same strategy (Alvarez, 1972). The common point of all these biographies is the fact that, while all portray the suicidal, the mad, the bitch-goddess or the psychotic Plath, none of them mention her interest in history or politics.[18] As areas of the male discourse, Sylvia Plath has been shunned from history and politics. However as Deborah Nelson insists, "Plath was a remarkably astute cultural critic"(Nelson, 2002: 21).

While most of the critics have tended to ignore the political motives of Plath's works, scholars such as Linda Wagner Martin (1987), Anita Hell (2007), Jo Gill (2006), Janet Badia (2006), Christina Britzolaskis (1999), Deborah Nelson (2002), Robin Peel (2002), Elaine Tyler May (May, 1999), and Jacqueline Rose (2001) strictly emphasize the political voice of Plath that has been either repressed or interpreted as an excess, an impossible terrain for a female intellectual. However, it is an unbelievable attempt to gloss over the political consciousness of Plath and the reflection of this consciousness in her works.[19] As Robin Peel quotes from Plath's Smith College notes,

> *In the essay written in May 1952 for Religion 14 at Smith College, Plath advances what the teacher's annotation describes as "a reasonably clear and forceful statement of Humanist position." Plath summarizes her core beliefs as follows: I believe that man is born without purpose in a neutral universe…. I do not think that man has an inborn conscience or*

Everyone in some measure wears a mask, and there are many things we do not put ourselves into fully. In 'ordinary' life it seems hardly impossible for it to be otherwise"(Laing, 1965: 95).

[15]Cheryl Walker strictly criticizes Butscher's categorizations of Plath. She notes, "The Plath he presents moves in and out of periods of depression and stasis as her various selves "the golden girl," "the bitch goddess," "the earth mother" work together or deny one another's needs. He "explains" the feverish creativity of Plath's late phase as the result of liberating anger"(Walker, 1977: 538). For further reading see Cheryl Walker (1977). Reviewed works: Sylvia Plath Method and Madness by Edward Butscher. *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 18 (4), 538-541.

[16]Plath's poem "Elm" starts with the following statement: " know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root.I is what you fear. I do not fear it: I have been there….I am terrified by this dark thing"(Plath, 2004: 28).

[17] For further reading see Sylvia Plath (2004). *Ariel. The Restored Edition*. New York: Harper Perennial.

[18] While in his biography of Plath, Alvarez tries to portray an exceptional Plath, in *The Writers Voice*, he portrays her case as an exemplary one. He states, "Plath, of course, was by no means the first important artist to die dramatically by her own hand. Almost two hundred years before her, Thomas Chatterton committed suicide and became, as a result, a great Romantic symbol. But at least he didn't write about the act. Neither did Hemingway or Hart Crane or Randall Jarrel or even, in so many words, Virginia Woolf. To follow the logic of your art to its desolate end, as Sylvia Plath did, and thereby turn yourself into the heroine of a myth that you yourself have created was something unprecedented. It changed the nature of the game. Art, that most stringent and solitary of disciplines, suddenly came to resemble a high-risk activity, like skydiving.(Alvarez, 2006: 110)

[19] However, as Frederick Jameson emphasizes "…there is nothing that is not social and historical –indeed that everything is "in the last analysis political"(Jameson, 2002: 5). For further reading on Jameson's political unconscious theory see Jameson, Frederick. *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a socially symbolic act*. Oxon: Routledge, 2002.

preconceived moral standards; he is really indoctrinated with the particular man-made laws and moral customs particular to his own area and environment.(Peel, 2002: 42)

Alluding to the Cold War years, Plath defines the power of the social forces that were the extensions of the political ideology of the age. Another example is postulated by Linda Wagner Martin, who quotes Plath's letter to her friend written in 1950, 'People don't seem to see that this negative Anti-communist attitude is destroying all the freedom of thought we've ever had….Everything they don't agree with is Communist"'(Wagner Martin, 1987: 59). Furthermore in her unabridged journals, it becomes clear that even at a very young age she commented on political events of her time. She writes,

Why do we electrocute men for murdering an individual and then pin a purple heart on them for mass slaughter of someone arbitrarily labeled "enemy?" Weren't the Russian communists when they helped us slap down the Germans?...(Plath, 2000: 46)

Although Plath had always been interested in politics and also used political motives frequently in her works, the critiques have tried to purge politics from the name Sylvia Plath. The main reason of that is the political discourse of Plath which attacks the ideologies of the Age of McCarthyism. The *Ariel* poems which have always been read under the light of Plath's painful break up with Hughes is a very good example of that. The underlying reason of that kind of reading process is the attempt to depoliticize the political motives in her works that attack the corrupted Cold War ideologies. For instance, in "Elm" Plath associates "fear" and "the bottom"(Ariel 28) with Cold War. The voice of the poem states, "I am terrified by this dark thing"(28). The suffocating social space can also be seen in "Wintering" through which Plath associates the political corruption with a dark room. The narrator says,

This is the room I have never been in.
This is the room I could never breathe in.
The black bunched in there like a bat,
No light ….(Ariel 89).[20]

The association of darkness as the metaphor of Cold War politics can also be seen in *Crossing the Water* poems. In "Face Lift" the voice of the poem claims, "Darkness wipes me out like chalk on a blackboard…"(5). In addition, one of the most dramatic criticisms of the Cold War politics is reflected through *The Bell Jar* that has been severely depoliticized by the literary and cultural critiques. *The Bell Jar* starts with Esther Greenwood's famous depiction of the electrocution of the Rosenberg's, which is one of the most famous quotations of twentieth century literature.

IT WAS A QUEER, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would like, being burned alive all along your nerves. I thought it must be the worst thing in the world. (BJ 1)

Esther's portrayal of fear and entrapment is also evident in Plath's famous story "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams." At the end of the story, the narrator summarizes the air of fear in America and she responds to the Cold War with a poem,

The only thing to love is Fear itself.
Love of Fear is the beginning of wisdom.
The only thing to love is Fear itself
May Fear and Fear and Fear be everywhere. (171)

Plath insistently focused on the traumas of entrapment in another *Johnny Panic* story. "Superman and Paula Brown's Snowsuit" focuses on the happy old days and the present chaotic atmosphere which forces Plath's characters to face a real world that is in fact the world of war. As the narrator of the story asserts, "That was the year the war began, and the real world, and the difference"(287).

Apparently, Sylvia Plath's works have been shunned from politics as she criticizes the political corruption of her age. Even in her journals she writes,

…America dies like the great Roman Empire died, while the legions fail and he barbarians overrun our tender, steak, juicy, butter, creamy million-dollar-stupendous land, somewhere there will be the people that never mattered much in our scheme of things anyway."(J 32).

[20] For further reading on the political motives in *Ariel see* especially the poems "Cut," "Ariel," "Tulips," and Edge."

That is the reason why Plath comments in her 1959 story "The Shadow

> *The shadow in my mind lengthened with the night blotting out our half of the world, and beyond it; the whole globe seemed sunk in darkness. For the first time the facts were not slanted Mother's way, and she was letting me see it. "I don't think there is any God, then," I said dully, with no feeling of blasphemy. "Not if such things can happen"(155).*

It can be assumed that Plath builds her discourse upon the traumas of Cold War America as her works criticize the imposition of silence upon an entire generation. Apparently, her literary voice has been found dangerous. What is interesting is the fact that Plath reflects the castration of the dangerous intellectual voice through the use of 'cadavers' in her *Colossus* poem "Two Views of a Cadaver Room," and *The Bell Jar*. As an extension of her usage of 'cadaver,' Plath associates the intellectually and socially castrated generation with the term 'brainwashed.'[21] In "Insomniac" the narrator reflects the picture in which, the individuals are

> *…immune to pills: red, purple, blue—*
> *Are riding to work in rows, as if recently brainwashed.(Crossing the Water 11)*

It can be asserted that Plath's political discourse was ahead of her time as even *The Bell Jar* was shunned from schools and libraries as it was believed that the novel encouraged freedom of women in all areas of social life in the Cold War years. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why critics have tried to purge politics from the name Sylvia Plath and mostly from *The Bell Jar*.

Although even the first sentence of the novel begins with a political discourse, the protagonists comment on the electrocution of the Rosenberg's, her novel has been labeled as a product of her psychotic nature. For instance, Domenica Paterno in her article, comments that "*The Bell Jar* is a novel of descent into madness, uniquely female in viewpoint…and circumstances"(Paterno, 1988: 135). Saul Malof, in his review in New Republic adds,

> *Nor can we take seriously her having referred to it as a 'potboiler' and therefore to be kept separate from her serious work: the oldest and most transparent of all writer's dodges. All the evidence argues against it: as early as 1957 she had written a draft of the novel; she completed the final version on a Eugene Saxton Fund fellowship and felt toward its terms an urgent sense of commitment and obligation; the painstaking quality of the writing but above all, its subject: her own pain and sickness, treated with literal fidelity, a journal done up as a novel, manifestly re-experienced, and not from any great distance of glowing health.(Malof, 1988: 103).*

Like Paterno, Malof interprets *The Bell Jar* as a poet's casebook that derives its power from Plath's sickness, and the journals as insignificant documents, that simply reflect that sickness. The most significant point is the reality that the negative attributes to *The Bell Jar* have been used to try to draw a clear distinction between *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar*. While *Ariel* has been defined as a great success, *The Bell Jar* has been defined as an apprentice work. It must be remembered however, that Plath wrote the *Ariel* poems[22] after she had separated from Hughes. Therefore, the power of the *Ariel* poems has become associated with the patriarchal voice, the power of the male that Plath looked for. On the contrary, *The Bell Jar*, *the Colossus*, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, *Winter Trees* or the Journals (that ended before the separation) have been regarded as unnecessary works that must be clearly separated from *Ariel*. An example of that is the publisher's note in the 1972 version of the *Winter Trees*. It writes, "This last collection of Sylvia Plath's poems is contemporary with the Ariel poems brilliant, breath-taking poems that were written in the last months of her life, when she was at the height of her genius"(Plath, 1972). Interestingly, Plath had written hundreds of letters, thousand's of pages of journals, many short stories, novels, and many poems before she wrote the *Ariel* poems. The big difference is that the *Ariel* poems were created in a time when Hughes was absent in Plath's life. This difference might have triggered the publisher to define Plath's genius as working at its highest capacity.

The Plath myth obviously takes its power from the *Ariel* poems, the reflection of a schizophrenic creative capacity resulting from the absence of the husband and a return of the lost father. Even Plath's daughter, Frieda Hughes, in the restored edition of *Ariel* agrees, "I saw how she used her separation from

[21] Brainwashing had first entered the American lexicon in the 1950's as a result of the Communist hysteria. One of the Cold War experts Eugene Kinkead defines the terms as "the total psychological weapon by means of which…Soviet Russia firmly expects to conquer the rest of the world"(9).

[22]Melody Zajdel emphasizes that "*The Bell Jar*, just as *The Colossus* stands as a necessary apprenticeship to the final poems of *Ariel*"(Zajdel, 1988: 246).

my father to define all her other pain and how she put her emotions to work, each one a string to her instrument, being made to sing for her"(Plath, 2004: 12). However, if previous commentators have tried to define Plath's genius in terms of the power of the separation from Hughes, how can one explain the creative capacities of *The Bell Jar*, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, and *The Colossus* and *The Unabridged Journals*, which are all the forerunners of the *Ariel* poems? If the success and the organic bond among the works before *Ariel* are ignored, how can one understand the significance of these works that highlight the inner motives of the *Ariel* poems? The main point is the fact that, by exploiting the creation time line of the poems, the Plath industry mainly attempts to postulate a deeper crisis that include a betrayed, mad, psychotic woman who created solely as a result of her traumatic marriage. On the other hand, the success of *Ariel*, which was "…sold in unprecedented numbers, more than a half-million copies, and turned out to be one of the all-time-best-selling volumes of poetry"(Alexander,1991: 343-344) was not the result of the inspiration she derived from Hughes who "had by then published his first book in part thanks to Plath's already honored professionalism"(Moses, 2007: 89).

It can be asserted that Plath takes her strength not from her so-called tragic life transformed into literary works, but from her creative and intellectual power that had the strength to transform that life into marvelous literary works. As a result of this magical power, she achieved the creation of the voices of *The Bell Jar* (Plath 1971), the *Ariel* (Plath, 2004), the *Colossus* (Plath, 1968), Sivvy,[23] the journals (Plath, 2000), *Letters Home* (Plath, 1975), *Winter Trees* (Plath, 1972), *Three Women* (Plath, 1972) all of which signify the *cultural* and *social facts* of their generation.

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[23] Sivvy" is the nickname of Sylvia Plath that was used among her family members. She used that name especially at the end of her letters to her mother and brother. For further reading see Sylvia Plath. *Letters Home: Correspondence*. Ed. Aurelia Plath. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

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