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Sylvia Plath and the Fetishization of Suicide

Sarthak Sharma



Sylvia Plath's most famous work ahead of either *Ariel* or *The Bell Jar* is her suicide. No conversation about Sylvia is possible without talking about her head in an oven. Sylvia- the Suicide far overshadows Sylvia- the Artist. In endless blurbs of Sylvia's books her suicide has been marketed as an advertisement luring the reader. Many critics and readers say that no reading of Sylvia's work is possible without talking of her history with depression and suicide but the same critics and readers don't say the same about Ernest Hemingway and his suicide. Hemingway shot himself with a shotgun yet on no blurb of Hemingway's book has his history with depression or suicide ever been mentioned. Most readers aren't introduced to Hemingway through the knowledge of his suicide, unlike with everyone's introduction to Sylvia. Jack London, David Foster Wallace, Hunter S. Thompson, and many other writers suffered the same fate; but in no other case did the tragic death become the entire embodiment of art itself.

For generations of readers and critics Sylvia's suicide has been a symbolic event resulting from the same sadness that her art embodies, but isn't that obvious? Don't artists always live symbolic lives? Hemingway shooting himself in the head with a shotgun was to his fans just a classic 'Heming-way' to die. Sylvia's suicide very obviously affects our interpretation of her work, but the cult that surrounds Sylvia, her sadness, and her suicide reveal something about our society as a whole. It's a

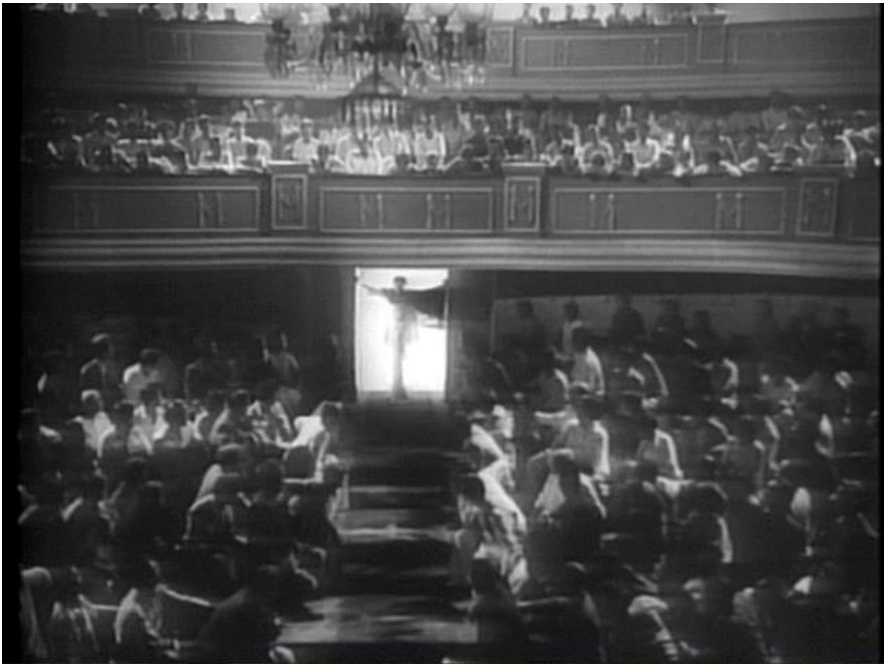
truth we often shy away from, and that truth is that the artist is better dead than alive for a society that revels intensely in masochistic sadism. Through the once-sad-now-dead artist we fulfill our own escapist suicidal wish while being entertained. About this escapist suicidal wish, Nietzsche wrote that the thought of suicide is a great consolation: by means of it one gets through many a dark night. Through Plath generations have derived such a consolation. It would even have been fine to do so if it hadn't come at the cost of restricting a reading of Sylvia, and thereby leading to a great reduction in its artistic value.

Readings of Sylvia seem to be unable to separate themselves from her suicide. Besides committing the great folly of being unable to separate the person from the art, what such readings have also done is lead to the rise of a culture that loves depressed, desolate dead artists. The tragic early suicide in itself has become a sign of artistic greatness. Online Trends indicate that suicide is now a deemed merit maker in all industries.

Sylvia Suicide cult is a glorified fetish that likes artists for the tragedy they exhibit. This cult, of which the media and we together form a part of, romanticizes sadness and simultaneously creates a culture responsible for such sadness. We feel no empathy for all these dead heroes; instead, we like them more dead than alive. If Sylvia were to rise from her grave and come back into the world of living, we would stop reading Sylvia altogether. The Sylvia cult would die and we would pick on some other tragic hero, for we wanted for ourselves a hero that dies and is loved only in death. This prostitution of artistic death, as in the case of Sylvia was explored in 1957 when Guru Dutt produced, directed, and acted in the cult Bollywood classic *Pyaasa* (Thirsty). The movie tells us the story of a struggling Urdu poet in a hypocritical society that faces no qualms in immortalizing the dead, but finds it difficult to exalt the living. It explores the

nature of a selfishly fickle world which patronises and abandons art as a trend.

Halfway through the movie, Dutt wakes up in a world where he is famous but considered dead. Dutt walks like a ghost in this world and hears conversations about the pain and greatness of his art. He sits and hears strangers' boasts of knowing the great poet and man that Dutt was. In the great climax, Dutt arrives at a memorial service for himself where his worshippers fail to see the God they believed in. Dutt is resurrected like Christ; but upon resurrection this Son of God realizes that humanity isn't worth it, and renounces it in great nihilism, singing a song titled- What Is this world to me, even if I can have it?



*This world of palaces, thrones and crowns
This world of societies that resent humanity
This world of those hungry for material wealth*

What is this world to me, even If I can have it?

(Translated from Hindi)

Dutt's character chooses oblivion over eternity like Sylvia, like Kurt Cobain, like every dead artist. Just like those strangers' boasts of knowing the great poet in Pyaasa, we continue our boasts as we hear Nirvana songs or as we read Plath's poetry, or while we watch Guru Dutt movies because Dutt himself died the depressed drunk death of the tragic artist. The next verse flows:

In this world where a person's being is only a toy

It is an establishment that worships death

Where it costs less to die than to breathe

What is this world to me, even If I can have it?

(Translated from Hindi)

Imagine Sylvia as she walks like a ghost through this world and hears conversations about the pain and greatness of her art. Imagine her head in an oven as Dutt's song climaxes.

Burn this world, set It on fire

Remove this world from my sight

This world is yours; you take care of it

What is this world to me, even If I can have it?

(Translated from Hindi)

Sylvia was a show that people knew would end in suicide. What the world did to these artists' post-death tells us exactly what pushes them to such deaths. It's this selfish and abusive world that does so. The world is a machinery pushing the sensitive to take their own lives with an industry marketing on those deaths. We continue our selfish business of abusing art and artists in their lives and after. Posthumous releases of albums, movies, and books are marketed extensively and are

also sold extensively. Posthumous awards are given in every industry to people that were never even long-listed for those same awards. Evoke sympathy, boost consumerism is the motto after every artist dies. We romanticise suicide because it's easier than accepting ourselves to be part of a culture responsible for suicides around us. To escape blame, we create enemies that lead to the suicide of the dear dead artist. For Sylvia it was Ted Hughes. For Kurt Cobain it was Courtney Love. No matter how many times, how many like Sylvia put their heads in, how many ovens would we realize that Sylvia wasn't the writer who killed herself, but more. She was a person, not our suicide category of consumerism. A gross reduction of Sylvia seems to take place even in the Academia because there are no critical essays about Sylvia as a transgressive writer (*The Bell Jar*) or Sylvia as a Beat/Post-Beat poet (her obviously Allen Ginsberg inspired confessional poetry style) or better yet of Sylvia as an absurdist Kafkaesque writer (*Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom*). Sylvia's tragic heroine idea is evoked even in her feministic readings, as if Sylvia was only her tragedy and nothing else. None of her work today can, however, be separated from pre-conceived and conditioned notions. For that matter, none of her work has been sourced. The artist is considered more artistic in the depressive quest for death. Why is it more poetic to die for art than live for it? It isn't, and we know that, but we need to feel a sense of mock remorse for the death we contributed to. It's classic tokenism. A person isn't merely the trauma they bear. Sylvia needs to be reanalysed and reread differently without all bias because suicide is far more common than extraordinary art. In a world where more are at risk of murdering themselves than being murdered, we have to be careful what we deem iconic. There's no poignancy to sadness and no beauty in tragedy. Even though sadness can result in art, there is nothing artistic about sadness per se. The problem is that our culture doesn't differentiate between Sylvia's head in an oven and Marilyn Monroe's white dress blowing in the

wind. If we did we would separate Sylvia the writer from Sylvia, the writer who killed herself like we all should have but didn't.

In 2003, Sylvia's daughter Frieda Hughes denied the use of her mother's poetry for the BBC biopic on Sylvia's life and wrote a poem in response.

In 2023, a biopic titled *Thirsty* will be released in which, 'What Is this world to me?' will be played against a Guru Dutt lookalike who would yet again choose oblivion over fame.

They think

I should give them my mother's words

To fill the mouth of their monster,

Their Sylvia Suicide Doll,

Who will walk and talk

And die at will,

And die, and die

And forever be dying.

- Frieda Hughes, Their Sylvia Suicide Doll; 2003

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Sarthak Sharma

Sarthak is a writer and artist working towards creating a body of work that stretches beyond the confines of his own world and touches everybody equally.

He currently is pursuing a Master's in Filmmaking and works at Kunzum Bookstore.

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