
**Human Agency and Human Body in
Sylvia Plath's 'Tulips'**

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Abstract: The poem Tulips by Sylvia Plath is an evocative rendering of loss and lack. The poem is built on the premise of unfulfilment and emptiness that extends into alienation. Tulips talks about agency-less-ness and sensory experientiality in a medical space that is heavily dehumanized where human subject is increasingly commodified as an object of diagnosis and investigation and is being constantly looked at through a medical gaze. In this poem there is a collapse of economy of empathy that leads to certain degree of defamiliarisation where the very known and familiar ideas turn very much opposite and in a way against an individual. And in such an environment or space agency is not possible. The lack of empathy and understanding on multiple levels has adverse effects on human agentic control, the individual feels more like an inanimate entity. This paper tries to approach Plath apart from the conceptual frame of her mental illness and as there is much more to her literary credit that needs to be understood and to ignore that will be a huge discredit to her work. She was a fearless, unflinching and unapologetic writer.

Keywords: Agency, self, loss, medical, body.

Introduction: Sylvia Plath wrote 'Tulips' in the aftermath of a very tragic miscarriage she had in 1961. A sense of loss, trauma, deterioration, realization gets dramatically described in this piece of poetry through use of figurative language. The speaker talks about her experience of alienation which she feels at many levels. This poem was published like many other of hers posthumously especially when her husband Ted Hughes enjoyed a position of very famous poet. She was consumed by the male authorship of Ted Hughes where her poems were not being accepted for publication. This resulted in further alienation and loss of self in Plath. She suffered at two levels – as a female poet and as a mother. Tulips examines the how female body and female agency get completely lost in a dominant male-centric environment in a very spectral way.

Discussion: The poem is situated in a very heavily commodified and dehumanized space, a medical space of a hospital. The poem records the whole experience of being subjected to the medical gaze, dissected and being looked at by the medical gaze, of being examined and judged by medical gaze. There is also a degree of defamiliarisation at play where the familiar parameters and cognition of objects is dramatically defamiliarised. For instance “tulips”, are flowers but here in this poem the flower metaphor works differently. Normally flowers suggest tranquility, reconciliation, peace, love, romance etc but over here flowers become signifiers of separation, violence, alienation and essentially consumption.

Tulips deals with the sense of loss of ownership on oneself, one’s body not only physical aspect but also as cognitive self. When we discuss the effects of loss and alienation on humans in this poem, Plath is writing about different aspects or embodiments of humans. According to embodiment studies, ‘embodiment’ can be understood as a synthesis of having a body and being a body which means ‘embodiment’ consists of two components.

Edmund Husserl discuss the concept of ‘embodiment’ in “Phenomenology of Embodiment.” According to him the body is not only an object like other objects in the world but a reference from which our life can be experienced. The synthesis of the two provides a sense of self-realization and self-awareness. Therefore any trauma or violence on body or its experiences leads to the loss or damage to one’s self. In order to understand how embodiment works in this poem, we have to understand that there exist two kinds of embodiments- the ‘embedded embodiment’ and the ‘extended embodiment’. The embedded embodiment is what is within a human body, its neural and other mechanisms or in other words how a body functions and behaves. On the other hand ‘extended metaphor’ is the way we navigate with the world around us, the objects, people, structures, institutions, language etc. For a healthy embodiment to take place the two embodiments should be in-sync.

Here in Tulips we see how these both kinds of embodiments are interrupted in different degrees. The speaker is not only suffering a loss and violence within but through the extended experiences within the medical space. The speaker is present in a medical space while she begins to lose the sense of ownership, over her body and her cognitive self. The speaker wrote Tulips when she was emotionally vulnerable as she had suffered loss and trauma in her personal life. The trauma of the miscarriage is shown as a spectral presence throughout the poem, the presence of a dead and unborn being is very palpable.

In the opening stanza we have a speaker describing her passivity and powerlessness which gradually unfolds. “The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here./ Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in./ I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly/ As the light lies on these walls, this bed, these hands./ I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions./ I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses/ And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons.” Tulips are shown in a negative connotation, there is a sense of impending destruction and perhaps violence related to them. Winter is a season of infertility and decline and that atmosphere is very much present. Even

the walls are white giving them a sepulchral quality or whiteness represents the deadness and decadence metaphorically. The word 'snowed-in' shows a setting of deadness and stillness, there is a degree of discomfort and anxiety about the peacefulness. The speaker has surrendered everything, her name, her medical history, and her clothes. She has been taken patient uniform and a bed number. In surrendering her ownership on herself she has become numb.

The first stanza also highlights the dehumanization and bureaucratization of a medical space. There is no equation of empathy between a patient and the medical staff. The whole medical machinery is dehumanized and there is no connect between the two. The patient is presented as an object of study and correction. The body of the speaker is owned by this medical machinery. It is a sick body that needs to be corrected through coercion to regain health and vitality. The machinery and the medical space at work is essentially patriarchal and dominating. The presence of a female body inside this apparatus becomes very symbolic. Plath is trying to say that she is losing herself under such space, rather she undergoing liquidation of self. As the environment is highly dehumanizing, the nurses acting mechanically, coming at going at regular intervals without any human touch with the patient. She is not considered anything apart from being a sick body.

In the next stanzas the mechanicality and superficiality of this medical space is further expressed when the speaker says, "They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff. /Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut. /Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in." These lines have metonymic quality of describing separately head, hands, and pupils. These body parts have become mechanical and it underscores loss of agency or control. Even the nurses who "pass and pass" are mechanical as they do not show any empathy or kinship. The way Plath expresses her body in this medical space is very agency less and without any sense of ownership. "My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water/ Tends to the pebbles it must run over smoothing them gently." Body has become a pebble over which water passes, the pebble has no agency and stands stonily and inanimate. The speaker is made numb through needles. Numbness undercuts the conscious control and cognitive control. These medical instruments take away her agency and this kind of sleep or numbness is not at all humanly. It is a dehumanized experience and violence. In following lines there is a shift of focus towards her miscarriage which she compares to a 'baggage' and her body to a 'thirty-year old cargo boat', where it is not an adventurous and glamorous vessel of exploration, it is a vessel with lot of luggage and it has slowed down its speed. As the speaker is lying on a table without any sense of control. She is being severed from any association and can hardly hold on to her memories. For curing and cleaning her, in the purging of foetus from her body all the sense of kinship is being done away with.

Undergoing the treatment for her miscarriage has caused trauma and violence on her body. The presence of tulips in her room gives an unsettling quality and she is not comfortable with them as if she does not want them. She expresses her feeling as, "The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me." The redness of tulips reminds her of her trauma

and injury. The image of red tulips wrapped in a sheet seems like an “awful baby” that is “breathing”. The redness is suggestive of her own loss and trauma and it makes her uncomfortable and traumatized viscerally. She feels as if these red tulips are sinking her further and making her more and more powerless. There is a feeling of claustrophobia and drowning. Plath in these lines expresses of becoming faceless that shows that exhibits the intention of possible suicide, or that she wants to defy all the societal roles. She has an aspiration for agency. Tulips seem to suffocate her as she writes “The vivid tulips eat my oxygen.” She feels as if her vitality is being sucked out by these cannibalistic flowers. There is notion of medical gaze at play through window as well as tulips. She compares herself to a flat cut-out paper without any embodiment or self.

Redness of tulips have resulted in loss of tranquility and peacefulness. They have filled the room with “loud noise” and these tulips are becoming monstrous as there is a sense of being watched. Before tulips came her attention was playful but now it has turned violent. Here we see vividly the process of defamiliarisation through tulips and how Plath is expressing the dehumanizing quality of a medical space, the sound and beeping of “rust-red engine” which can be a ventilator, monitor, or oxygen supply is creating a very mechanical aura. This medical space has greatly influenced her sense of being. These machines running around her which is a part of medical procedure for healing process has made this room like an inferno where walls are “warming themselves”.

In the last lines of the poem Plath is comparing these Tulips to some exotic species of animals where there is a degree of mystery and menace, as if they are not recognizable. She confesses that she is aware of her viscerality, which gives her a sense of being ill and the functioning of her body. She is noticing everything about her body. In state of illness the cognitive awareness of senses increases which is also described by Virginia Woolf in her essay “On Being Ill”. Woolf has given expression to the reality that has been inadequately presented and expressed. According to Woolf Illness makes a person to reach the rock bottom of existential aloneness. Plath feels that health is a territory to which she is an outsider.

Conclusion: Sylvia Plath in this poem records her experience of miscarriage, trauma and loss while she was admitted in a hospital. The feeling of agencyless-ness and powerlessness in a medical machinery that is completely coercive, dehumanizing and controlled space.

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