

# A Try To Relinquish The Hidden Felicity OF Law- Adeconstructive Reading OF Sylvia Plath's Poem-Metaphors

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**Abstract--**“*Metaphors For a Pregnant Woman*” was the title that Sylvia Plath has given for her poem ‘*Metaphors*’, initially when it was written in her journal of 20<sup>th</sup> March 1959. The complete title clearly announces the stage of pregnancy and implications of motherhood. But she herself shortened the title to “*Metaphors*” for publication which came a year later. This created the ambiguity in the poem. Plath wrote this poem mistakenly believing that she is pregnant. So shortening of the title opens a wide opportunity for interpretations. So this paper aims at expounding the poem “*Metaphors*” in a standpoint that it discusses and portrays the theme and symbols for childhood, applying the “*Deconstruction Theory*” of Jaques Derrida.

**Keywords--**Deconstruction theory, motherhood, interpretation, childhood, riddle, metaphors, symbolism, life, fate, demise, innocence, nostalgia, lost beauty .

## I. INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston , Massachusetts, on October 27,1932, to Aurelia Schober Plath and Otto Plath. Her father died when she was eight years old. Plath was acutely affected by the loss of her father and this grief haunted her throughout her life. This feelings prompted her to write most of her poetry. Sylvia Plath wrote the poem “ *Electra on Azalea Path*” subsequently her visit to her father’s grave. After her father’s death the little Plath declared that she would never speak to God again. At the age of eight and a half her first poem was published in the Boston Herald.

Sylvia Plath, who is a poet of confessional style of work, expounds the worldly realities than her personal sentiments through her works. Plath, being a gifted poet, novelist and a short story writer has packed Pulitzer prize in poetry for her “*The Collected Poems*” posthumously in 1982. A number of works were published and she won a scholarship in 1950. Most of the poems written by Sylvia Plath were self divulging. Themes of Sylvia Plath’s poetry are of deep feelings and intense emotions. Her poem “*Child*” is a quintessential example of this. In the same poem ,she foreshadowed her own suicide. Her secluded life and frustration constrained her to divert herself to the world of poetry, to express her vehemence. She felt depressed, deteriorated and devastated in the male dominated world. It becomes intense towards the end of Plath’s married life.

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“*Metaphors*” is one of Sylvia Plath’s very short poems and it was written in the year 1959, when Sylvia Plath “misconceptionally” believed that she might be pregnant. “*Metaphors for a Pregnant Woman*” was the original title for this poem. After a year the title became abbreviated as “*Metaphors*” for publication. From the poetic standpoint “*Metaphors*” is enthralling. This poem comprises nine lines, each line with nine syllables. The poem “*Metaphors*” was encompassed in “*The Colossus*” by William Heinemann in 1960. The widely accepted and interpreted meaning of the poem is fascinating. The poet generates various depictions on a theme of a carrying woman

I’m/ a/ rid/ dle/ in/nine / syll/ a/bles,  
An/ el/ e/ phant/, a / pond/ er/ ous/ house,  
A/ mel/ on stro/ lling/ on/ two/ ten/ drils.

The poem is commonly interpreted in the way that the poet built up a number of images in the reader’s mind- the nine months of gestation. The poet has used different poetic devices to make the poem faultless. Eventhough it cannot claim for a perfect rhyme scheme, it is rich in imperfect rhymes in certain lines – (syllables – tendrils), ( house – purse), (calf – off ). The poem is written in free verse. Each line of this poem consists of one or more metaphors. Another poetic device used here is alliteration. ( two tendrils, money’s new minted, cow in calf). The poet has given a suitable title for her poem – “ *Metaphors*”, which means,an analogy between two objects. It is an allegory which Sylvia Plath used to express the mental, psychological picture of her life.

It was widely elucidated in a way that the first metaphor used in the first line is a riddle. Riddle is a paradox to be answered in nine syllables. The poet is giving an indication that the nine syllables refer to the nine months of pregnancy. This is a long period of time in a woman’s life having dreams and expectations. It is a period of mental confusion and imagination. Then the physical appearance of a carrying woman is picturised as an elephant because she has become fatty and bulky. The word ponderous is used to indicate the idea of slowness. A melon in this poem is used as a comical image moving on two thin legs. The other metaphors used are, a red fruit, ivory and fine timbers that reflect the shadows of the above mentioned ideas of comparisons. When yeast is used in dough, it gets doubled. In the same way, it is said that, a woman gets doubled in size at her pregnancy stage with her child. Again it was analysed as the mother’s enlarged stomach resembles a purse holding precious currency. Here the mother’s precious currency is her baby. ‘A cow in calf’ was interpreted as the pregnant woman with swollen stomach feels herself as a cow in calf, although it is literally never possible. The implication of green apples here reflects the idea of Adam and Eve who ate the apple from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the garden of Eden. Eve was punished by god to have endured the pain of childbirth. Towards the end of the poem, the journey of train is widely compared to Sylvia Plath’s entrance to motherhood. The journey should be continued till the passengers reach the destination, like

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wise a child-carrying mother will have to keep on with her journey until she reaches the destination of giving birth to her child. There the baby and the mother will be anticipating the bright future ahead.

### **EXECUTING JACQUES DERRIDA'S DECONSTRUCTION THEORY IN SYLVIA PLATH'S POEM "METAPHORS"**

Deconstruction, one of the major revolutionary literary theories is a *modus operandi* for literary exploration that contradicts one's securest presupposition. Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher emphasized the notion of definition by contrariety. In accordance with Derrida's deconstruction, no particular meaning can be concluded for an idea. "Deconstruction seems to center around the idea that language and meaning are often inadequate in trying to convey the message or idea a communicator is trying to express. Since the confusion stems from the language and not the object then one should break down or deconstruct the language to see if we can better understand where the confusion stems."— Derrida.

Applying the Deconstruction theory of Derrida, the new interpretation derived is, this poem announces the period of complete childhood in a person's life. This poem is a first person narration. Her childhood is expressed through this poem very appealingly. In this poem Sylvia Plath describes her childhood in a metaphorical language. Many of her poems gave emphasis to the physical appearance in various ways.

The first line of the poem 'I'm a riddle in nine syllables' can be interpreted as – the nine syllables indicates the nine letters of the word 'CHILDHOOD'. Childhood is the most beautiful time of a person's life, and it is a riddle as the behaviour of a child can never be predicted. A riddle is a question or statement intentionally phrased so as to require ingenuity in ascertaining its answer for meaning. Child is the most fascinating, innocent, lovable, laughable and unimaginable puzzle in every family.

Sylvia Plath, being a small child of eight years, had witnessed the unexpected death of her father. At that time of her life she encountered the cruel fate of destiny. And the future condensed in front of her as a riddle. The negative events in childhood including a violence, unexpected loss etc are more harmful than comparable events experienced later in life. Parents play a particularly important role in the life of children. She found solace in writing to escape from grief. Here in the first line of this poem, Plath expresses her deep concern about her childhood, which according to her, was a riddle.

The second line of the poem 'An elephant, a ponderous house' seems to be more comic when compared with the first line which was more confusing. The word 'elephant' is used as a symbol which denotes two ideas – elephant is an animal which is always restless. An elephant is the animal that can not be static and same nature captures the attention of the viewers. It is symbolic to the nature of a child. She used the image of an elephant, a ponderous house to indicate that she was somewhat like a slow moving creature, she was not a skinny child but a chubby one. She was fluffy but not idle. Like every child she always moved, explored, embraced every

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flowers, loved every creature and as a little girl she might have hugged and loved squirrels, birds, and with all ease she gave them shelter like a house.

In the third line 'A melon strolling on two tendrils' she used the image of the sweet edible fleshy fruit-the melon. Here she again relates her appearance in her childhood to a melon. When we refer her childhood images we could realise that she was such a plumpish, chubby girl. Being a small innocent girl, she was also very sweet and enticing with full of love and affection for everyone and everything. She appeared to her parents, as a melon walking on its tendrils. The appearance of a small girl is described here like a comic image that is very sweet, pleasant and gives happiness to others.

Her movement in childhood can be described as strolling- a careless and carefree life of childhood. She entertained others with her childish demeanor without knowing that she is entering into a world of misery, tension and sorrow.

In the fourth line 'O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers' she used the image of 'red fruit' in order to compare her fruitful childhood and to show how her face once blushed in happiness and wonders around her. She did not have ever thought that her face will once more become a red fruit. Later her face is red because of her pain of living, the burden of life and sorrows she faces. The phrasing of 'ivory' is also symbolic. Ivory is always beautiful and elegant when it is in life. In the same way, when Plath was a small child, she was so cute and beautiful. When that stage of life changed her innocence – the inner beauty began to fade just like ivory becomes fade when it is with out life. Timber represents the elegant and magnificent childhood of Plath. As she was a cute child, she was given proper care and attention. But timbers are also subjected to damage due to the climatic or seasonal changes. If it is not given proper care and treatment, timbers will also get infected. In the same way Plath also might have got deeply affected or infected in her life when she was out of her parental care, love and affection. She was a child who had deeply and adversely affected by the loss of her father.

'This loaf's big with its yeasty rising' is the fifth line of the poem. She had already compared her childhood to a melon and a red fruit. Now in the fifth line she compares herself to a loaf of bread. A loaf of bread is fluffy. Yeast is the ingredient that causes rising in the bread. Similarly, she had a spark of imagination since her childhood that made her rise to the position of a great writer. So, while untangling the knot, we could see the loaf is the metaphor used here for the poet herself. She had a spark of artistry from her early childhood itself.

The sixth line of the poem 'Money's new minted in this fat purse' shows the use of symbolism by the poet. She had already mocked her appearance vividly. In this line, we could see the reference of a fat purse. Here fat purse illustrates the fat body of the child.

For a wise person, money or wealth is his knowledge. It can also be the innocence in a child. The spirit of knowledge or the thirst for knowledge is so fresh in the childhood, as she is innocent and admired everything

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that strikes her sight. But the wealth that is either the thirst for knowledge or the innocence, diminishes as one grows up. He becomes ignorant and indifferent.

A child was rich in the sense that she had that crave for knowledge. Everything around fascinated her. So she was rich in all sense in her childhood.

The seventh line 'I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf' is the most suitable line to assert the point that the poem discusses the stage of childhood. In this particular line, she says that she is in a stage of cow in calf. Use of the phrase 'cow in calf' is quite uncommon. Actually calf is in the womb of cow. It is not viceversa.

So applying Derrida's deconstruction theory it is possible to interpret in another way. The 'spark of imagination' from the previous lines can be called for the reference for this particular line. A cow is an animal with all senses that knows the do's and donts for a great extend. A calf is a small, innocent, playful, carefree creature. So when we relate this to a human being, ie, a child and an adult, a child is carefree, innocent and playful but an adult is rational, full of thoughts and mature.

Hence 'cow in calf' means, eventhough Sylvia Plath was in the satge of childhood, she had an adult mind full of imagination and rational thoughts. She, being a calf had all the traces of a cow, deep inside. It shows that from the childhood itself there was the imagination of a mature writer in little Sylvia Plath.

'I have eaten a bag of green apples'- the eighth line of the poem gives a mood of repentance. It indicates that a small carefree child had literally eaten many apples. Here this apple can be the forebidden fruit that led to the down fall of the first man and woman. Sylvia Plath was once as small, innocent, happy, loving and cheerful child. That time, she was totally devoid of the worries and burdens of life. Plath being a small child, might have eaten many apples, oranges, berries etc. Lateron when she encountered the problems in life, she rued that she also had to confront the repercussion of the original sin.

According to the law of time, Sylvia Plath should grow up losing her innocence, sacrificing all good things that the great childhood possessed and must have to enter into a world of sorrows, tensions and all the unforeseen realities of adult life. Towards the end of the poem, a tone of nostalgia, lost beauty and lamentation over her fate etc could be seen.

The ninth line, ie, the last line of the poem, "boarded the train there's no getting off" exponds Plath's surrender before the destiny. Here the 'train' symbolises the journey of life. Life is a journey starts from the stage of infancy and continues till it reaches the final destination of death. This journey passes through different stages like childhood, youth, adulthood and finally the old age. For a normal, natural human being, he or she has to experience all these stages without any discrimination. Any one can skip life but it is against the law of nature. So if a child is born in the earth, he or she has to experience the beauty of childhood, fancies of youth, struggles of adulthood, the solitude of old age and here inthis stage she will be kissed by the eternal sleep.

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Here Sylvia Plath says that, she boarded the train of life from infancy and she experienced the beauty of childhood, ie, the divinity of Godly stage but she is experiencing the harsh realities of life, burdens ,sorrows, helplessness and alianation in her adulthood. So she accepts the reality and surrenders to the fate saying that there is no shortcut in the life and no one can get off from the train of life. But she recollect the beautiful and devine memmories from her good old childhood.

## II. CONCLUSION

In this poem Sylvia Plath asserts the importance of childhood as the golden period in one's life. Thus, this poem presents a theme that seems simple but has a wider significance. It reminds us of the famous words of John Conolly (*The Book Of Lost Things*) "For in every adult there dwells the child that was, and in every child there lies the adult that will be."

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