

The Representations of Anxiety in Sylvia Plath's "Letters Home"

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Abstract:

"*Letters home*" deals with Sylvia Plath's anxious life. Anxiety dominated Plath's life due to the stressful death of her father when she was young, her mother's hard work to support the family, lack of trust and faith in her life, and raising her children alone after her husband's infidelity. This paper approaches her letters to explore her psychological disorder using the concept of anxiety as explained by the American Psychiatric Association (DSM- 5)*.

The paper concludes that males have defined and applied mental illness to women throughout history. Female lunacy was thought to be caused by the delicate structure of a woman. Even after psychiatrists began researching patient conditions, the woman's role as a patient remained unchanged, while the man's role as a doctor remained the same. Plath's *Letters Home* shows her life experiences from her first day in college till a few days before her suicide. She sustained the mental illness over time due to the society's stereotyping. However, the purpose of this paper is to shed light on anxiety in Plath's *Letters Home*.

Key words: Anxiety, APA, Letters Home, Suicide .

(DSM_5) refers to Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder, 5th Edition

تجليات القلق في "الرسائل" لسيلفيا بلاث

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ملخص البحث:

تتناول "الرسائل" الحياة المضطربة لسيلفيا بلاث . فلقد تحرت اعمال كثيرة حياتها من خلال اطر ومفاهيم مختلفة في الادب. لقد سيطر القلق على حياة بلاث بسبب وفاة ابيها التي انهكتها عندما كانت في مقتبل العمر، مادعى والدتها للقيام بعمل مضني من اجل مساندتها، فضلاً عن انعدام الثقة والايمان بالحياة، الى جانب توليها تربية ورعاية ابنائها بمفردها بعد القطيعة مع زوجها وخيانته لها. يسبر هذا البحث موضوع الاضطراب النفسي مستفيداً من مفهوم القلق معتمداً على تقارير مؤسسة الطبيب النفس الامريكية التي ورد ذكرها في "الرسائل".

يستنتج البحث ان الذكور قد عرفوا وطبقوا الامراض العقلية على النساء على مر التاريخ. فجنون المرأة يعتقد انه بسبب بنيتها الرقيقة. وحتى بعد ان بدأ الاطباء النفسيين بدراسة الظروف المحيطة بالمريض، بقي دور المرأة كمريض على ماهو عليه الحال ولم يتغير، فيما استمر دور الرجل كطبيب هو الاخر على حاله . اظهرت " الرسائل" تجارب حياة بلاث منذ اول يوم في حياتها الجامعية كطالبة واستمرت لغاية الايام الاخيرة قبل انتحارها. وقد تحملت اعباء الاضطراب النفسي طويلاً بسبب اراء المجتمع الشائعة عن المريض النفسي. ولهذا فأن الغرض من هذا البحث هو تسليط الضوء على القلق والاضطراب النفسي في "الرسائل" لسيلفيا بلاث".

الكلمات المفتاحية: القلق، مؤسسة الاطباء الامريكيين، "الرسائل"، الانتحار .

INTRODUCTION

Letters Home, published in 1975, was compiled by Auerelia Plath to provide a different perspective on Sylvia Plath (Samara,2004: 18). There has been a dispute over the acceptance of *Letters Home* as a literary piece; however, the letters reflect Plath's true feelings, and the chronology of the letters could be read like a novel based on real events. Sylvia Plath's letters provide additional proof that a large part of the appeal of letter writing for Plath was the capacity to develop tones and registers, voices and attitudes, political and private personae. Her letters depict her feelings.

Despite the numerous studies that focus on Plath's mental disorder as manifested in her works, no studies has been done to explore her letters in terms of mental disorder. A mental disorder is not a nature-caused disease, it has been globally recognized and accepted as endemic in modern society. However, the consequences of mental health may be worse because there is no vaccine for it and people, whether talented or not, are at risk. Many writers, such as Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway,

Sylvia Plath, Ann Sexton, and Scott Fitzgerald, suffered from mental disorders. Burton (2013:173) observes that female writers, in particular, had “substantially” higher degrees of mental illness represented by depression, panic disorder, and generalised anxiety when associated with the US (female) population at large. This finding corroborated with earlier studies, which concluded that female writers were at a higher risk for affective disorders than male writers. The studies show that female poets were likelier to be mentally ill than other writers (Kaufman, 2001,37-50). On the other hand, writers with mental illnesses were highly suicidal (Jamison, 1996: 141).

Moreover, anxiety is recognized as one of the mental illnesses that can affect and play a crucial role in an individual’s life. According to modern psychologists and psychiatrists, anxiety is an emotion characterized by an unpleasant state of inner turmoil, often accompanied by a nervous behaviour such as pacing back and forth, somatic complaints and rumination (Davison, 2008:248). It may be called “a future-oriented mood state in which one is not ready or prepared to attempt to cope with upcoming negative events” (Barlow, 2000, 1249).

There is a lack of studies that are examining women writers suffering from anxiety through the lens of the American Psychiatric Association; therefore, this paper focuses on Sylvia Plath’s *Letters Home*, utilising the psychology of (DSM-5) to uncover the existence of anxiety. Many females during Plath’s era became a victim of anxiety, like Anne Sexton and Virginia Woolf before her, because of the stereotype of the society at that time in America. The current paper is to explore Plath’s *Letters Home* to identify her anxiety disorder. The study aims to show how Plath, a gifted writer of the postmodern era, committed suicide because of her inability to cope with anxiety.

The Representation of Anxiety

Freud (1977:243) describes how anxiety starts when a traumatic situation overcomes a person’s ego, and leads to anxiety as the ego’s responds to the warning of the possible perilous conditions in a traumatic case. Thus, the ‘dangerous situations’ revolve around the threats that may arise from being helpless, or losing a loved one or one’s love or being attacked. He also insisted that these threats are the indicators of a primary and ultimate danger. This new perspective forced Freud to consider anxiety as preceding repression and giving rise to it. An interesting study on Plath’s life was conducted by Cooper (2003: 286,469) that examines her history of psychiatric disorders. Though the survey was superficial, it brought a new perspective on the connection between psychiatric disorder and creativity. Thus, Plath’s life and letters will be examined to investigate the possible elements of anxiety presented in her *Letters Home*.

In uncovering anxiety, the American Psychiatric Association states that anxiety is an emotion characterised by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure (Brown et al., 2001, 110(1), 49. Doi:10.1037//0021-843x.110.1.49). Furthermore, it can also be referred to as “a future-oriented mood state in which one is not ready or prepared to attempt to cope with upcoming negative events” (Barlow, 2000, 1249). This implies that the distinction between anxiety and fear can be made based on future and present dangers. Besides, anxiety can also be used in the sense of ‘agony’, ‘dread’, ‘terror’ and ‘even apprehension’ (Iacovou, 2011,356-367, 312). Moreover, anxiety is probably one reason for psychiatric and physiological symptoms (Feola et al., 2013, 7,54). In this context, anxiety that is leading to depression may become a cause of a self-harm in the form of committing suicide (Jahan et al., 2018, 438). Młyniec, et al. (2017, 103,295-326) see that anxiety might be considered as a psychological illness that may emerge due to various sociological, genetic, and medical reasons. Sociologically, anxiety may develop due to environmental stressors such as official issues, difficulties at the office, relationship issues or/and domestic issues. In such a case, it is suggested to withdraw the patient from situations that have triggered anxiety or negative feelings in the past. Bateson, et al.(2011:707-715) observe that there may, sometimes, be genetic reasons for anxiety; for instance, a person who has family members with an anxiety disorder is more likely to suffer from it. Also, anxiety may be caused by medical reasons because of the symptoms of a disease, medication’s effects, or the stress of an intensive surgery or prolonged recovery. All the factors mentioned earlier, individually or together, are the main causes of anxiety that may be reflected in the work of Plath, who suffered from stresses.

Anxiety and Literature

Ludwig (1994: 1650-1656) reveals that women writers were more prone to mood disorders, substance misuse, panic attacks, general anxiety, and eating disorders than men. Multiple mental problems are also common among writers. Familial transmission of psychopathology was evident, but physical or sexual abuse throughout childhood was also a contributing factor. Creativity appears to be hereditary. The parents’ mental challenges and the combined creativity scores prove to be significant predictors of total creativity. Accordingly, the increased prevalence of specific emotional disorders in female writers was tied to mental illness. The partnership is not necessarily uncomplicated. The predictive analysis suggests that familial and environmental factors are also substantially influenced. As such, this study seeks to ascertain whether Plath possessed the characteristic of anxiety and how it manifested itself in her letters.

The Existentialist Aspects of Philip Larkin’s Poetry is a study conducted by Bao (1991,5). According to him, Larkin has preserved many such experiences as emptiness, disappointment, boredom, fear, and death in his poetry that drive him to anxiety. He notices that Larkin’s poems are meant to give their readers an abrupt,

unexpected shock that would enlighten them on the human condition in the modern world. Larkin's persona feels anguish and fear over the cold reality of the human condition and often finds that he is isolated and lonely. Hui and Jian-ling (2020, 254-258) view that the female authorship is symbolised by and perpetuates traditional patriarchal culture's role orientation of women. On the other hand, she (the female) unconsciously identifies with the imprint of the patriarchal culture inscribed in their thoughts for a long time. It was revealed with and deviated the traditional patriarchal culture's role orientation of women, showing the author's psychological pressure in writing, specifically, the anxiety of female authorship.

May (2015:275) gives a clear explanation of the development of anxiety in an individual who grows up with the incomplete support of parents. While self-awareness emerges at the point in the development, a measure of freedom and responsibility in each action also emerges. However, on the other hand, this individual develops at every moment as a member of a social nexus upon which s/he is dependent not only for the early meeting of biological needs but also for emotional security.

Plath's *Letters Home*

Letters Home is a set of letters chosen as a sample of this study. *Letters Home* is a collection of correspondences between Sylvia Plath and her mother ranging from her college days (the 1950s) to the time of her suicide in London (1963). According to Wagner-Martin (2003:148), Plath's poems, books, essays, and letters recount her life experience; therefore, *Letters Home* reflects her life drama and anxious times and situations. These letters provide hints to the readers regarding her deep despair (Plath, 2011,181).

Moreover, the collection of letters reflects her identity conflict and her various issues in life. Still, it is also her aspiration to retain celestial insanity that could transmute daily life experiences into something extraordinary that could, in return, turn her into a type of deity (Wilson, 2013,173). Besides, the letters also reflect her desire to be free and omniscient; for instance, she refers to herself as "the girl who wanted to be God" (Plath, 1975, 40). Wilson (2013:182) points out that the conflict between Sylvia's inner and outer façades is more evident in the letters. For example, in one of the letters, she alludes to the fierce battle between her inner and outward worlds by saying that people are unaware of "the chaos that seethes behind my exterior" (p. 106). As a result, Plath uses her letters to speak with her mother about her social standing and domesticity, as well as her terrible sense of inner emptiness and solitude (Lowe, 2012,57-82). Because these letters thoroughly portray Plath's psychiatric condition, they are chosen as a study sample to acquire proof of Plath's anxiety symptoms.

Plath's *Letters Home*'s Analyses

Based on (DSM-5), many elements of anxiety are detected in Plath's *Letters Home*. Extreme stress and financial issues might significantly impact one's mental and physical health, relationships, and general quality of life. Money problems may have a negative influence on sleep, self-esteem, and energy levels. She tries to compensate her marital life by attending the literary groups and circles but still she lacks some of her needs as a woman and her self reliance as far as the financial needs. It can cause anger, humiliation, or fear, cause friction and disputes with family and friends, aggravate pain and mood swings, and even risk depression that drives anxiety (DSM-5, 2013)

In a letter to her mother sent after her father's death, Plath assured her mother, "I will never talk to God again" (Plath, 1975, p. 64). This demonstrates Plath's undying love for her father; hence she is so stressed and anxious and blames God for taking her father. Unfortunately, this feeling causes her anxiety because her father's memories haunted her during all the stages of her life. In another letter, she dictated with empty bravado, "... in the cycle of joy and sorrow; there will always be an outlet for me. I have the ability to lose everything all at once." (Plath 1975, 64). Plath appears to be losing her progress in her study due to her father's death. She keeps moving in circles, and she hopes to succeed her critical years as a student. Nevertheless, she fails to control her anxiety, and that is why in the end, she commits suicide. She keeps looking back on the past and sacrifice the present reality for wishfulness, which heightens her anxiety.

The absence of the father figure causes her anxiety because she is eager to remember her memory with him because, at that time, she suffers from being isolated "Although my father spoke four languages and had lived in England two years before migrating to the United States, . . . I still remember how his face reddened. He took me across his knee and spanked me. Weeping loudly over that injustice (Plath, 1975, 11)". Another state of anxiety is embodied in writing: her memories conjure up to the past. Her past was disturbing her, and she was forced unconsciously to relive it in the present. Hence, she fell prey to anxiety. According to the American Psychiatrist Association (DSM-5), anxiety disorders can cause people to avoid circumstances that trigger or exacerbate their life. Job performance, schoolwork, and personal relationships might all suffer as a result. It is a feeling of sadness or stress that causes thoughts of suicide and death. It is also characterised by past traumatic events (APA, 2013). In this case, Plath's relation with her father impacts negatively her life from her childhood till her death. So, anxiety plays a crucial role in her life by driving her to three suicide attempts.

Plath writes a letter to her brother before her initial breakdown "...it is a frightening thing, that mother would kill herself for us if we calmly accepted all she wanted to do for us. . . . we have to fight against her selflessness as we would fight against a deadly disease" (Plath, 1975,116). Here, the analysis reveals a state of anxiety that stresses herself because her mother is 'killing herself' by working more than one job. Her father died, leaving nothing, so they moved to her grandmother's house. The financial problem Plath faced increased the anxiety in her life besides her father's haunted memories.

Moreover , according to (DSM-5), "anxiety occurs as soon as the phobic object or situation is encountered" (Association, 2013, 198). Plath wrote "Even now, I dread the big choices which loom up in my life . . . What college! What career! I am afraid. I feel uncertain about what is best for me! What do I want! I do not know. I love freedom. I deplore constrictions and limitations" (Plath, 1975, 48). However, the desire to employ selfhood in opposition to societal demands was a challenge that often made Plath experience moments of conflict and anxiety. In psychological phraseology, Plath seemed to suffer acute symptoms of sporadic and reciprocally detesting dispositions. As presented in paranoid somatic patients, love leads to charity and ignorance to contempt in this psychological extremity. Nevertheless, Plath's letters are considered the outcome of an experienced artist, making these very neurotic experiences their basis, stimulating force, and supporting matter. As such, these outstandingly distressing and terrorizing experiences give direction to her poetic lexicon, imagery, and symbols.

In another letter, Plath describes her feelings in the clinic after her first suicide attempt. She suffers from severe anxiety at that time "I have emerged from insulin shock and electric (ugh) shock therapy with the discovery, among other things . . . to comfort me with an assurance that no psychiatrist can quite manage to convey (Plath, 1975, 134)". Therefore, Plath feels lonely during her treatment in the mental institution. The worst thing she has to face is handling the electric shock that worsens her mental condition. Fear of loneliness raises anxiety and makes her shudder from horror, and no psychiatrist, as she believed, can help her. As depicted in her letter, her emotional turmoil and anxiety are explained straightforwardly. Based on (DSM-5), medication-induced anxiety is one of the mental health disorders (Donovan & Roose, 1995, 177-178). Therefore, Plath's letter reflects her anxiety due to her hospitalization in the mental institute during her mental disorder. About (DSM-5), anxiety disorder is characterized by worry about illness, concern about pain, and bodily preoccupations (APA, 2013, p. 232)

The war and policy also harm their status of Plath and increase her anxiety. In a letter to her mother, Plath describes the tense situation about the war and how depressed she was by the politicians of England , especially (Sir Anthony Eden) who supported the war at that time. Eden ignored the feeling of the British. Politicians like him, dragging their country to a war) cause an anxious environment that impacts

innocent people. Plath writes, “Well! Between my personal crisis and the huge crisis aroused by Britain’s incredible and insane bombing of Egypt, . . . the eloquence of Gaitskell in the Opposition is heartening. To think I literally rubbed elbows with Eden at that Claridge reception” (Plath, 1975, 48). Plath reveals the dilemma of her anxiety by referring to the British government that helped Israel in its war with Egypt in November 1956. Indeed, across Plath’s letters, journals, and poetry, we can trace this shadow—the shadow, for example, of what Stevenson (2005) calls “Britain's late imperial ambitions at Suez,” (Plath, 1975, 17), which would later, along with the “anxiety [produced by] the proliferation and testing of atomic weapons,”. Plath was also anxious about the uncertainty what the future may hold as she was recently married. Her anxiety was aggravated by the thought of not having children. Referring to (DSM-5), people who have to endure a war environment will reportedly experience so much anxiety and fear about the future with climate change that they choose not to have children (Association, 2013). In another letter to her mother, written around the same time as “Context,” above and, therefore, around the same time as her midwinter drafts, Plath makes this connection between Hiroshima and the current state of Cold War tensions more explicit. Plath, who was due to give birth in just a little over a month, confided to her mother the depth of her concerns about the “issues of our time”—issues that include those she would list in

Context”—into which her son was soon to be born “The reason I haven't

written for so long is probably quite silly, but I got so awfully depressed two

weeks ago by reading two issues of The Nation— . . . As the reporter for the

liberal Frankfurt paper says, coming back to America from his native Germany,

it is as if he hadn't been away” (Plath, 1975, 437-8).

Already, we see here Plath forging connections between a personal experience (raising children) and “the bigger things” (the military-industrial complex, the Cold War). Moreover, as we saw in “Context,” Plath reflects the “issues of our time”—this time explicitly—in terms of destruction (“the power for destruction is real and universal”) and this destruction, in turn, concerning creation (“trying to bring up children in such a mad, self-destructive world”).

Although Plath was physically and emotionally tired by her mood swings between joys and sorrows, these plunging cycles enabled her to express her struggles and worries in her letters. She advanced as a metaphysical rebel, asserting herself forcefully and even gaining parity with God "I am afraid of getting older. I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free . . . I think, to be omniscient...I think I would like to call myself the girl who wanted to be God" (Plath, 1975, 47). There lies the difficulty of ring-fencing in Plath's periods of high productivity. It is now generally recognised as a period of almost two weeks or more in which, at minimum half, a dozen of works were written. According to the above letter, Plath suffers from social anxiety because she fears getting married and indulging in her daily routine. She also expresses her fear of getting older, which she thinks she will not like. Based on APA(DSM-5), "In social anxiety disorder (social phobia), the individual is fearful or anxious about or avoidant of social interactions and situations that involve the possibility of being scrutinized" (APA, 2013, 190).

This output level did not appear to pose difficulties to the poet anxiety seems to have released her creativity. In a letter to her mother, Plath explained, "Every morning, when my sleeping pill wears off, I am up about five, in my study with coffee, writing like mad – have managed a poem a day before breakfast. All book poems. Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me"(Plath, 1975,459). The letter was written during the last months before her death when she became weary of domesticated life. Plath's daily routine worsened her anxiety and made her hardly breathe. In order to sleep, she starts taking sleeping pills to control her daily life. According to (DSM5), individuals who have a posttraumatic stress disorder, such as separation from beloved ones and medical diagnoses, will face a high risk of anxiety (APA, 2013). Thus, Plath's current condition of her mental disorder triggers insomnia that pushes her to consume sleeping pills to overcome her anxiety.

After separation from Ted Hughes, Plath moved with her two children to London. At that time, her situation was unenviable. Plath's income is hardly enough, and bears the cold weather. She describes her miserable condition to her mother as 'a cow and no lasting happiness'. Furthermore, she expressed her loneliness and planned to see a doctor "I have been feeling a bit grim—the upheaval over, I am . . .being catapulted from the cowlike happiness of maternity into loneliness and grim problems is no fun . . . I am going to start seeing a woman doctor, . . .doctor, which should help me weather this difficult time. Give my love to all" (Plath, 1975, 491). According to (DSM-5), older adults associated with decreased quality of life will be at risk of anxiety. In addition, (DSM-5) observed that separation from a primary caregiver or attachment figure is categorised under separation anxiety disorder (APA, 2013). Hence, Plath suffered from a separation anxiety disorder because she was separated from her husband. Hence, she commits suicide because of her incapability to control her life after her divorce; suicide attempts or suicidal ideas will be haunted by the individuals if they do not treat the anxiety factor.

CONCLUSION

"*Letters Home*" represents Plath as a happy and jovial daughter to her mother. However, there are times when she hinted at her anxiety through her letters. She wrote a letter because of an important incidents that happened to her during her life in the college and after in her *Letters Home*. The best thing is that the readers grasp the lesson from the writers' works and get benefit from them during life. However, Plath uses the letters techniques to show patriarchal dominance. Plath's dramatic style reveals that her anxiety disorder cannot be controlled and drove her to suicide in the end. Her anxiety began with her father's death as the sole prominent figure in her life; however, she sustained the mental illness through the years due to the stereotyped society. Moreover, utilizing (DSM-5) to identify anxiety in the selected texts from *Letters Home* was able to analyse and show her mental disorder.

Financial issues, haunted memories, separation, and war are the main causes of anxiety that drive Plath to commit suicide. They are very tense mounts as readers are repeatedly placed where they understand the events. Plath, in a way, according to the events as presented and narrated in her letter, revealed that she was in the wrong setting. Things could have turned out differently if she had existed in another setting. The linguistic details are straightforward in Plath's writing. The simple dialogue she used expressed her real emotion and made the readers feel pity for her situations and sufferings. A narrator who has no identity and faces anxiety from the events around him/ her allows readers to experience these events without bias and form their interpretations.

Readers are drawn to texts that allow them to step outside their reality and experience another time, place or people. At the same time, they crave connection and the ability to see themselves in these times and imagine their response to events. By using techniques that create empathy in their readers, authors make this possible. The authors who suffer from an anxiety or mental disorder must be studied to be a lesson to the readers to avoid, especially when they are driven to suicide.

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