

Sylvia Plath Revisited in the Lens of Depersonalization

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ABSTRACT

This article examined Sylvia Plath's hysterical symptoms through the lens of depersonalization and investigated Plath's "Daddy", "Mirror" and some selected letters. The study adopted the American Psychiatric Association approach in which depersonalization is classified as a hysteric psychoform of consciousness and awareness. As discovered in the study, a large number of poems and letters of Plath illustrated how she is treated as an object or a commodity under male domination during her time. It was also found that, one of the major disorders of depersonalization is associated with a sense of detachment from one's self which are discovered in the selected literary works of Plath. In sum, Plath represented depersonalisation as a memorable response to suffering situations such as emotional abuse, stress, and imprisonment in her life. By adopting the APA to analyze written literary texts, it will bring new multidisciplinary concepts and behaviours involved in the construction of 'depersonalization' to provide researchers with an essential frame for new study.

Keywords: Depersonalization, Sylvia Plath, Daddy, Mirror, Letters Home

INTRODUCTION

It is reported that both psychology and literature represent the real world, the issues portrayed in literature occur in real life. This relation is described by Nurlianingsih (2014) in words as; a literary work is an outcome of man's conscious reflection and imagination of objects that s/he sees, escapes, feels, replies and visualizes and conveyed to the people through the medium of language. Therefore, the issues represented in a particular literary work mirror the circumstances of the real world; it either purely mirrors the real world or partially reflects the real world in association with the visualization and imagination of the writer (Nurlianingsih, 2014). Many writers experience psychological disorders and reflect that in their literary works such as Ann Sexton and Virginia Woolf (McMillan&Kaufman, 2013). However, depersonalization is one of the hysteric symptoms that some writers are suffering from.

As with other clinical phenomena, the historical analysis of the term, concepts and behaviours involved in the construction of 'depersonalization' should provide researchers with an essential frame for their studies. Before the term was coined in 1898, and under a variety of names, behaviours typical of 'depersonalization' were reported by Esquirol, Zeller, Billod, and Griesinger (North, 2015). On the other hand, the word personalisation derived from a usage in Amiel's Journal intime, was first used in a technical sense by Ludovic Dugas. The new disorder has since been explained as resulting from pathological changes in the sensory system, memory, affect, body image and self-experience. During the 1930s, evolutionary views became popular, particularly in the work of Mayer-Gross. The unclear conceptual boundaries of depersonalization still invite confusion and often enough fragments of what used to be its core-behaviour are used to diagnose the disorder. Depersonalization has of late become subsumed under the dissociative disorders. The definitional instability of the latter, however, has caused further complications to the study of depersonalization.

Individuals with depersonalisation disorder experience the world or themselves in an odd, distorted, surreal, or mechanical manner. Depersonalisation disorder was considered as one of the common symptoms of hysteria by psychiatric perspectives APA. According to Sugarman (2019) Freud during his research in 1936 was astounded by depersonalisation, which leads to doubting reality and disbelief. He illustrated his depersonalisation as an Oedipal syndrome, a denial of truth to defend one's ego from the prohibited gratification of going beyond his father. On the other hand, Searl viewed depersonalisation as

an escape from superego punishment by assuming that inanimate objects have immunity. Searl revisited this theory as forming a superego inharmonious with the figure ego (Guralnik & Simeon, 2010).

The study aims to highlight Plath's severe depression and identity mental disorder resulting from patriarchal dominance and societal stereotypes. The result shows that hysteria symptoms such as depersonalisation restricted her existence and drove her to end her life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Depersonalization refers to a mental disorder in which the person has persistent feelings of derealization. Depersonalization can be described as feeling disengaged or disconnected from one's self. The previous studies reveal that the term depersonalization was firstly used by Henri Frederic Amiel in *The Journal Intime* as follows:

I find myself regarding existence as though from beyond the tomb, from another world; all is strange to me; I am, as it were, outside my own body and individuality; I am depersonalized, detached, cut adrift. Is this madness?

(Amiel, 1893).

As a clinical term, depersonalization was used by Douglas in 1898 to refer to "a state in which there is the feeling or sensation that thoughts and acts elude the self and become strange; there is an alienation of personality – in other words, a depersonalization" (M Sierra & Berrios, 1997, p. 12). This description denotes 'personalization as a psychical synthesis of attribution of states to the self' (M Sierra & Berrios, 1997). Early theories of the cause of depersonalization concentrated on sensory deficiency. Maurice Krishaber (1872) in Simeon & Abugel (2006) projected depersonalization as the result of irrational changes to the person's sensory modalities that lead to experiences of "self-strangeness" and the portrayal of a patient who "feels that he is no longer himself" (Simeon & Abugel, 2006, p. 51). Carl Wernicke's and his group proposed that all feelings (sensations) are constituted of i) a sensory component and ii) a related muscular sensation that comes from the movement itself and in return, assists in guiding the sensory apparatus to the stimulus (Mula, 2009). In depersonalized patients these two components are not harmonised and in consequence, the myogenic sensation fails to reach consciousness. However, this sensory hypothesis was challenged by others by pointing out that subjects of the study were taken too plainly, and attempts were made to describe experiences that are difficult to articulate in words (M Sierra & Berrios, 1997).

In addition, depersonalisation disengages a person from his self, an individual experiencing depersonalization may report feeling as if s/he is an outside observer of his thoughts or body, and often report feeling a loss of control over his thoughts or action (Simeon & Abugel, 2006). They further adds that in some cases, a patient may be even unable to accept his reflection as his own, or he may have out-of-body experiences. In such cases, the patient may perceive the surroundings as foggy, weird, or visually distorted. In the fact of Plath, the elements of depersonalisation become clearer. Observantly, her characters' sufferings are the result of them engaging themselves in the circumstances believing to get rid of the past misery. However, it caused them to suffer from another form of mental illness that is called depersonalization, disengaging themselves from the world. Furthermore, Lanus et. al (2012) agreed that identity disorder is one of the symptoms of depersonalization that drive to hysteria. At this mental stage, for instance, Plath appears confused about who she is and feels like a stranger to herself. She started behaving differently at different times. This is also counted as multiple personality disorder that occurs mostly when one lost his/her loved one unexpectedly as Plath does (Sierra, Medford, Wyatt, & David, 2012). In short, the symptoms of depersonalization disorder caused her inner turmoil in the form of depression (Schulz et al., 2015) self-harm, low self-esteem, phobias, panic attacks and suicide, and such dissociative symptoms further lead to the development of the chronic disorder, a venomous cycle of heightened anxiety. (Cahn & Polich, 2006).

In the case of Plath, fundamentally, she conveys elements of herself through the characters and voices that are portrayed, such as the two children in her poem, 'Edge' and Nicholas in 'The Night Dances'. So, we can say that Plath's intention was not to express her personality through her poems. Instead, she attempted to escape from her personality through her work (Spivack, 2012). The previous literature shows that Plath suffered from mental disorder; she suffered from memory, awareness and consciousness breakdowns. She experienced depression, nervousness and identity disorder that further derived her to the thoughts of suicide (Silberg, 2014). Hence, the study, here, investigates Plath's depersonalization through the lens of psychiatric perspective by analysing selected poems from *Ariel* and *Letters Home*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Depersonalization in Plath's poetry

The study found that Plath's severe depression and identity mental disorder resulted from patriarchal dominance and societal stereotypes. As a result, hysteria symptoms such as depersonalisation restricted her existence and drove her to end her life. In sum, Plath presented depersonalisation as a memorable response to suffering situations such as emotional abuse, stress, and imprisonment.

The data revealed that when she was emotionally deprived of her father's affection, she attached to the gap and the absence her father represented. Over time, her attraction to this constellation fixed into an objectification that shaped emotionally disturbing sensations. It further reflects that her filial devotion turns into gratuitous depersonalisation, representing despair tangled with the psychological outcome rooted in his emotional distance. This reaction against an emotionally dead but godlike father added to the abrasions she carried into adulthood, which triggered a gradual dissociation between her physic and psyche. Her writing represents the feelings obstructed from getting the required love.

It was found Plath felt terrified when left in the psychical singularity and inner isolation as she grew up fatherless. Her personality is marred with a feeling of displeasure, helplessness, and lack of confidence. The data strengthens the assumption that her suicide was permanently associated with the psychological turmoil of losing her father as a young child. Her writing reveals her intense anxiety after her father's death. Her poem, 'Daddy', is an example of how she perceives having a dead father. This poem depicts the complicated psychological dance with the father. In this poem, she metaphorically illustrated her dad as a Nazi and herself a Jew to represent her inner war:

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

In these lines, Plath states how her identity is depersonalized. She does not speak of herself as it is, but rather an external observer of her personality, she speaks like a Jew and does not see pure and pure things as is her purity, and she also feels fear of beautiful and attractive things such as blue eyes. APA emphasized that depersonalisation occurs when one feels mentally or physically detached internally or gradually becomes a disconnected observer. While looking into the 'inside', they feel that they have changed, and the world becomes more ambiguous, surreal, insignificant, or detached from reality. Depersonalisation can occur to anyone subject to temporary anxiety or stress. In this poem, Plath reflected on her psychological and morbid state and how her personality seemed destroyed.

Next, Plath's poetry represents the depersonalisation of the divided self, which is usually exemplified by the conflict between isolation and engagement and immobility and mobility. Her later poems are principally preoccupied with various hindrances of rebirth. The true self is encapsulated in Plath's symbolic use of glass imagery, such as a *mirror*, where the looking glass hides and reflects her true self at the similar time.

"Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she is." (Plath, 1965, Mirror)

Here, Plath metaphorically reflects an ingrained equivalent of witnessing conscience and describes a lifetime of interaction with an anonymous woman who thinks of ageing as disfigurement.

Plath's dual identity is evident in her poems. She retained both identities to burst her emotions, experiences, and identities in reflecting her inner conflicts, captured as monsters haunting her. As she writes in *The Applicant*, the woman is presented with the inanimate pronoun 'it', which further establishes a woman as a material piece of clothing. Plath depersonalised the woman and promoted her as an object. In *Face Lift*, the speaker is frozen to demonstrate a sense of helplessness. In *Purdah*, a woman is deemed as 'fade' and as ivory in *Childless Woman*. Furthermore, in *Gigolo*, a woman is represented as a 'pocket watch', while in *An Appearance*, simile was used to describe a woman's body as it shuts and opens like a 'Swiss watch'. This shows how Plath portrayed women as material objects without any personal qualities.

Depersonalization in Plath's *Letters Home*

The analysis also reveals the elements of depersonalisation in Plath's *Letter Home*. Plath, who suffers from the disorder, recognizes changes in the quality of her mental and physical activities. The social environment -(marital problem and society expectation- patriarchal) is changed to the extent that life seems fake, isolated and/or automatized. Furthermore, it was found how Plath's depersonalisation unconsciously fuelled the deception of hysteria and eventually thronged her to finish her own life. In her letters to her mother, Aurelia, Plath was indebted to accept patriarchal norms that marginalized her and ignored her existence.

In a letter written to her mother on December 7, 1961, Plath discusses her awareness of the political matters of her period of time and its relation to her own experience of motherhood "“I got so awfully depressed two weeks ago by reading two issues of *The Juggernaut*, . . . taxes go to military spending. Already (Plath, 1975)”. Plath's desperate consciousness of the remaining political atmosphere in which commercialism, capitalism, and social survival are complicatedly connected. She narrates that male in the patriarchal society act as a colonizer of women who are dealt as slaves and servants. Plath submitted that political leaders (the decision-makers) had depersonalised peoples' right to live in peace and control their minds and identity. In the prevailing situation, Plath found herself colonized by the seductive and ruthless male, turning her into a terror.

Three years previously before her death in 1963, Plath had experienced three pregnancies, one miscarriage, and several other viral and sinus infections. After her painful separation from Ted Hughes, Plath was depersonalised and intensely stressed and drained due to lack of sleep. In a letter posted to her mother on October 21, 1962, she complained:

"Don't talk to me about the world needing cheerful stuff! What the person out of Belsen – physical or psychological – wants is nobody saying the birdies still go tweet-tweet, but the full knowledge that somebody else has been there and knows the worst, just what it is like. It is much more helpful for me, for example, that people are divorced and go through hell than to hear about happy marriages. Let the *Ladies' Home Journal* blither about those."

(Plath, 1975, p. 466)

This letter also represents the depression and frustration she experienced. The heavy burden, her children, she had been left with, makes her annoyed and worried because she considers herself as a tool of production. Such type of life dissatisfaction depersonalized Plath, who is forensically honest when it comes to her emotional and mental health. In October 1950, not even a month into the academic year,

Plath was found exhausted and consequently suffered from depersonalization. In this letter, she seems ambivalent between emotional extremes:

I have been, and am, battling depression. It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative – whichever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it. I am now flooded with despair, almost hysteria, as if I were smothering.

(Plath, 2000, p. 440)

Here the writer talks about a chronic depression that she has lived through since the beginning of her adolescent life, which affects her life and fights it, which contributes to the dissipation of her personality and her loss, and thus leads to hysteria. She talks about the struggle of currents within her, which causes her state of depersonalization, as this depersonalization leads to a state of hopelessness, loss and hysteria, as the author herself states, and this is what APA emphasized.

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Moreover, Plath mentioned "working, living, dreaming, talking, kissing, singing, laughing, learning" during her summer career of 1951. Similarly, following her 1953 collapse or breakdown, she "soared into a dangerous high" and went foolishly through a "sexual frenzy", energetically dating and having sexual meets with several men. Furthermore Kukil (2002) , the publishing supervisor of Plath's novels, "talked to alumni who knew Plath [...] and they say that everything she did was at the same intense level. Everything she did, she experienced to the hilt" (Moses, 2010, pp. 1-3) Though the emotionally delicate Plath attempted to hide her depersonalisation through carefully cultivated masks, her symptoms of mentality were perceptibly clear to those around her. This shows that her identity was split into multiple selves, resulting in hysteria and finally suicide.

To summarize, Plath highlights the symptoms of depersonalisation from Letters Home and Ariel that include her fears of insanity, loneliness, depression, a feeling of faintness, a sense of approaching death, and numerous somatic signs of anxiety. Moreover, depersonalisation is also visible in her transformed experience of time, changes in her lack of feeling and perception of space. Besides, she also indicated her subjective experience of physical change, loss of the specific feelings, increased self-observation, disturbances of memory, changes of clearness and variety of consciousness, and disturbances of autonomic function through her selection of the language. Plath is trapped in the dilemma of depersonalization and that drives her to face difficulty in harmonizing with the present. She feels detached and lacking engagement with herself. To compensate this, she creates a false persona to mask her depressive mode that is associated with her hopelessness about patriarchal society through her literary works. However, negative identity, depersonalization, and in general, manners showing lack, without doubt, of self-abound. Thus, she inclines to develop passivity, dependent and inert, without healthy aggression or initiative. This article presented the evidence of depersonalization of Sylvia Plath by analysing her selected literary works.

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