Poetic Echoes of Sylvia Plath in the Poetry of Oriya Poet Ramakant Rath

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A good deal of similarities and affinities are found in the works of two creative writers, Sylvia Plath and Ramakant Rath, who stand poles apart in respect of time, distance, culture and language. A comparative study of two such artists inevitably involves translation. It is for this reason that translation has assumed great importance in comparative literature: not only does it make available to us the literary works written in two different languages, but reveals significant similarities between these two poets belonging to two different linguistic communities.

In this context, a comparative study of the American poet Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) and Ramakant Rath (1934- ) of Orissa, India, while making us aware of the similarities and affinities, throws fresh light on their poetic sensibility. Rejecting the usual opinion that such similarity may be just coincidence, great artists feel and think alike irrespective of various differences. Both Plath and Rath helped lead reactionary movements against highly intellectual and impersonal artistic aesthetics in their respective countries. This was accomplished by both through the use of deeply personal and cathartic expressions of their fascination with and fear of death, as well as various experimental narrative techniques.

One of the best-known and most widely studied writers of the twentieth century, Sylvia Plath is generally labelled as a "Confessional Poet" whose poetry imbued with "unconsciousness material," depicts extreme and painful states of mind. Plath's poems exhibit inner disturbance. Her first volume of poetry, The Colossus appeared in 1960. It was with the publication of Ariel in 1965, however, that her reputation was established as a great poet. Characterized by an imaginative intensity, most of her poems deal with suffering and death,

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1 A renowned modernist poet in Oriya literature, Ramakant Rath makes a searching analysis of man's inner solitude and explores the possibility of redemption from anguish. His poetry is imbued with melancholy and death–consciousness. The ambit of his poetry encompasses the physical, the metaphysical, the mystical and the spiritual dimensions of human experience. In his poetry, Ramakant undertakes a passionate quest for answers to the riddles of life which perplex his protagonists.

Ramakant's reputation as a major poet of our times rests on books of poems such as Kete Dinara (Of A Long Long Time) (1962), Aneka Kothari (Many Rooms) (1993), Sandigda Mrugaya (Suspicous Hunting) (1971), Saptama Ruta (The Seventh Season) (1977), Sachitra Andhara (Picturesque Darkness) (1982), Sri Radha (Sri Radha) (1984), and Sri Palatak (Mr. Escapist) (1997). For Sri Radha, his magnum opus, Rath received the prestigious "Saraswati Samman" in 1992. He received India's 3rd highest civilian honour, the "Padma Bhusan" in 2006.

Translation excerpts of Ramakant's poems by the Khan and Dash.
displaying her conscious predilection for such themes. From the personal, her poetry rises to the universal, with an acute portrayal of the general human condition. Her poems have the dual qualities of lucidity and impact, which ensue from the fact that she speaks her poems to herself. For her, the actual experience of writing a poem is a magnificent one.

Ramakant Rath is a celebrated poet in Oriya literature. After joining Ravenshaw College, a premier college of the state, Ramakant Rath soon made his mark as a creative writer, particularly in the realm of poetry. Initially, like many contemporary Oriya poets, he too was influenced by the anti-Romantic theory propounded by Bidhubhusan Das, who not only introduced the Leavis-Eliot doctrine of impersonality in art, but also carried forward the movement with much zeal and vigour. Many of the well-known poets of the period, like Guruprasad Mohanty and others, hailed Eliot as their mentor and began to write under his shaping influence. Ramakant, however, refused Eliot's theories since he had a strong Romantic strain and a deeply individualistic outlook on life which defined his personality and prompted him to move in new directions. Perhaps, these traits finally led him to write confessional poetry. Many of his poems, and particularly his magnum opus *Sri Radha* (1984), established him as a poet who inaugurated a new tradition, style and mode of poetic expression in Oriya poetry. A comparative study of the confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath and Ramakant Rath, therefore, would yield interesting new perspectives on their poetry, their times and their sensibility.

In America, the emergence of confessional poetry in the late 1950s and early 1960s was a reaction against the theory of impersonality and the emphasis on the intellect propounded by critics like Eliot, Leavis and Ezra Pound. Whereas these leading figures of modern poetry advocated strict discipline in maintaining impersonality in the art of poetry, confessional poetry revolted against such rejection of personality in art and boldly asserted the "I" as a new manifestation of the poet's personality. In the poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and W.D. Snodgrass, one comes across an aggressive expression of personal feeling in a strikingly new poetic style. It chiefly deals with private experiences, and deep feelings about death, trauma, depression, psychological break-down, and relationships articulated through a new kind of rhythm and mode of expression. Obviously, this type of poetry manifests a strong autobiographical element that pivots on the "Self" or the "I." Confessional poetry is characterized by an analytical and searching exposition of pain, grief, tension and joy of being a poet. Such poetry is self-revelatory in nature. It seeks to reveal the poet's state of mind and feelings and his or her vision of life. Though this poetry tends to offer a very personal and a subjective account of experiences, beliefs, feelings, ideas, and
anguish, it also addresses issues which have universal significance. Confessional poetry seeks to enact tension in the psyche of the poet. Needless to say, confessional poetry initiated a new direction in American poetry, and influenced a good number of young poets. A generation of poets in the 1950s, known as Beat poets, included Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and the novelists William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac. Influenced by Walt Whitman, W.C. Williams, E.E. Cummings, Henry Miller, Ezra Pound and jazz musicians, they used techniques like stream of consciousness, syncopated rhythm, free verse, and collage.

This essay focuses, in particular, on the similarities between Sylvia Plath and Ramakant Rath as confessional poets. For example, Sylvia Plath appears to be obsessed with the idea of death, which she figures prominently in her poem "Lady Lazarus." She wants to die again and again, even though she is quite young:

I am only thirty  
And like the cat I have nine times to die.  
This is Number Three. (Plath 244)

Here, and in many other poems, she is blunt, outspoken, frank and quite vocal when she talks about death. She expresses no sense of remorse, regret or loss. In Ramakant Rath's poetry, we have almost the same kind of frank and candid approach to death as his poem "Anayase Nandia Kabita" ("Effortless Nandia Poem") from "Saptama Rutu" shows:

What is death? It is a running wheel  
Coming suddenly to a halt  
In death there is no light,  
No friendship, no hostility,  
No signs of good or bad,  
But it's a doubt if it has sight,  
Death is a wild wind, it has no end  
In the large billowy black waves,  
A little black soul gets drowned.

These lines give a metaphorical picture of the nature of death. Man is seen as defenseless against mighty death.

Similarly, Rath's another poem "Jao Nahi" ("Do Not Go") conveys a deeply personal feeling about death:

Strange afternoon! For me bewails a maiden  
In the graveyard. In her hand a bouquet of flowers.  
Her shiny black hair flows like waves.  
Will I then tell her the real cause of my death?
Then she will roll in laughter, and return home,
And will place the plucked roses again
In the rose plant. (Rath, Saptama Rutu 10)

The speaker is in a mirthful mood and likes to play pranks with his beloved. He is sure that the revelation of the real cause of his death will make her laugh a lot, and she will then return the plucked roses to the rose plant again.

As in the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Rath's death-consciousness can be studied as an expression of his vision of the human condition and the futility of all human endeavour to conquer death and the cruelty of fate. Man is seen as an exile, ejected into nothingness. Like Sisyphus, the protagonist of Rath strives relentlessly to fight against his limitations and utter hopelessness. But the pursuit never stops. The fate of Sisyphus is everyman's fate. An example of this Sisyphean struggle is mentioned in the poem "Sandhyabelara Drusya" ("Scenes of an Evening"):

Every season is a broken pot
Every rain is a torn bag
Being filled with pebbles
By the women of a lunatic asylum
In an endless evening. (Rath, Sandigdha Mrugaya 65-70)

Meaning here is wrested out of meaninglessness; purpose is sought in purposelessness. This is necessary to keep oneself alive amid the absurdity of the human condition. Ramakant's protagonist is aware of such tragic perceptions of life, which makes him spiritually stronger and gives him insight. Ironically, this insight is the source of all his grief. So this insight or consciousness becomes a disease for him. The protagonist therefore does every possible thing to keep himself alive. He remains in a life-giving illusion, a dream which will essentially remain a dream. The protagonist says in "Janharati" ("Moony Night"):

Sometimes I feel I am the sky, wide yet yellow
And see you widening your hands
As the sky widens to embrace.
I can't move from this place
Lest the moon should sink,
Lest the way be lost in light. (Rath, Aneka Kothari 26)

The protagonist's death-consciousness is, in fact, a life-consciousness, because the awareness of death, in a way, strengthens the will to live. Rath sees the increasing death-consciousness in his protagonist resulting from a mechanized, modern lifestyle which is bereft of emotion and selfless love.

It is significant that the theme of death in the poetry of Sylvia Plath as well as in that
of Rath is frequently tinged with irony. As Rath sees it, death may come in a very unexpected and funny way; it may not always make a grand entry. It may assume the form of an unmindful nurse as it does in his poem "Apekhya" ("Waiting"):

May be the nurse was thinking  
Of her college days  
Or fed on stolen drinks  
And forgot to give oxygen. (Rath, Aneka Kothari 18-19)

We have a similar echo of death that takes life to its final end and decay with a sense of irony and loss in Sylvia Plath's poem "The Dead":

No spiritual Caesars are these dead;  
They want no proud paternal kingdom come;  
And when at last they blunder into bed  
World-wrecked, they seek only oblivion. (Plath 320)

Rath's protagonist, however, does not believe in rebirth since he endows death with a finality. He sees death as an empty womb. If there is any god that reigns over life and death, it is emptiness, it is the void. If the present is a void, so is the future. In "Bright Future" Rath says of his protagonist:

He knows he'll die naked,  
There is no way out  
All way is closed  
In the change of time  
From the grave of the cloud. (Rath, Saptama Rutu 51)

Close to the theme of death run feelings and experiences of terror and trauma, which dominate confessional poetry. In the last stanza of the poem "Lady Lazarus," Sylvia Plath expresses her mood of defiance which is, in reality, a desperate effort to overcome the terror of death.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer  
Beware  
Beware. (Plath 246)

Plath reinforces her argument in this poem saying:

Dying  
Is an art, like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well. (Plath 245)
The same experiences of trauma and terror of death are felt by Rath, who makes a quiet effort to control them, as we find him doing in his poem "Vulture":

This is a land of endless death
Here men try a lot to be skeletons,
First, being fearful of the eagle,
And then out of habit or flair,
But here it's very pleasant to die. (Rath, Saptama Rutu 75)

Sylvia Plath is recognized as a consummate artist of confessional poetry for using her poetry as a vehicle of self-revelation without any sense of meekness, modesty or discretion. In an interview with Peter Orr in 1962, Plath once remarked, "I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife….I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrific, … with an informed and an intelligent mind." (Orr 169) This emphasis on subjectivity makes her poetry similar to that of Rath and at the same time adds a new force and depth to her poetry. This she achieves through employing creative devices, which usually provides her an outlet for the demons raging within her. This may again be noticed in her poem "Lady Lazarus":

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me. (Plath 244)

These lines also bring out the strong urge in her to end her life, revealing a strong, private and demonic spirit possessing her. This urge to meet death, face to face, and to seek bliss and sweetness in death is echoed in Ramakant's poem" Megha" (Rain):

The cloud disobedient
Does not honour my request,
It calls me in moist breaths,
And my death suddenly smells sweet
With the touch of
The perfumed drops of the rain. (Rath, Saptama Rutu 39)

As for the employment of poetic techniques, one observes striking similarities between Sylvia Plath and Ramakant Rath, who use techniques such as assonance, consonance, alliteration, and vers libre metrics. The examples cited below, though not exhaustive, demonstrate the dexterous use of these techniques by them.

Assonance is a figure of speech where there is the repetition of similar vowel sounds in a sequence of nearby words. In "Lady Lazarus," Plath writes, "Soon, soon the flesh / The
grave cave ate will be / At home on me." (Plath 244) In "Mirror," she writes, "Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness." (174) Again, in "The Sleepers," one finds, "They lie as if under water / In a blue, unchanging light." (122) In "A Lesson in Vengeance," there is also an example of assonance: "As smack of spite and the over scrupulous / Twisting of thumbscrews: one soul tied in sinews / One white horse drowned...." (80)

Examples of alliteration are found in "The Dead": "Couched in caulds of clay as in holy robes / Dead men render love and war no heed." (320) Another instance from this poem: "Rolled round with loam and cradled deep." (320) In "The Sleepers," Plath writes, "Curtained with yellow lace / Through the narrow crack / Odors of wet earth rise. / The snail leaves a silver track; / Dark thickets hedge the house. / We take a backward look." (122-123)

The use of consonance is seen in Plath's "Death & Co.": "I do not stir. / The frost makes a flower. The dew makes a star." (255) Another example from "Cut" highlights its use: "O my / Homunculus, I am ill. / I have taken a pill to kill..." (235) As regards vers libre metrics, usually, Plath writes in this style. Hence, examples are galore.

Some examples from the poetry of Ramakant Rath very well highlight the selfsame use of these techniques by him. The following lines of Rath are transliterated for this purpose. Examples of assonance are found in the poem "Bandira Kayakalpa" ("The Musings of a Captive"): "aji geeta gauchhi jhinkari aneka/satabdira niruddista chatigharamanankar, / aji sraddhamatarer dhakkare nihata / meghapari mafasali debadutamanankara." Another example from the poem "Megha" ("Cloud"): "niraba geetara luha / meghara akhire / megha munda potidie, / munda bharti alara balare, / hata mora tharijae / ei mamuli hatara sirare."

Examples of alliteration abound in Rath's poetry. In "Ujjwal Bhabishyata" ("Bright Future") he writes, "se mariba sehipari fungula dehare. / pheribara batabanda samayantarar / masanithu meghajae lambithiba paribartanare." In "Chhutile Ghata" ("When One Dies"), Rath writes, "suddhanila sunyata ba / sunaranga sakalara khara / kichhinahi, mala chadheinka / dehapaner mulayama mo kolaku tume / tanihowe asuachha mo prathama pratisruti dwara."

Besides these techniques, one finds a similarity between Plath and Rath in the use of repetition of words for achieving special effects. In "Daddy," Plath uses these expressions: "You do not do, you do not do" and "Ich, Ich, Ich, Ich" and "get back, back, back to you". (222-224) Example of this is also found in the poem "Crossing the Water": "Black lake, black boat, two black, cut-paper people. / Where do the black trees go that drink here?" (190) In "Lady Lazarus," Plath writes, "Soon, soon the flesh / The grave cave ate will be / At home on me." (244) Numberless examples of this are found in Plath's poems.
Ramakant also employs this technique for special effects. In "Anayase Nandia Kabita" ("Effortless Nandia Poem"), one finds an example of this: "chhota dhala hrada pani chakchak manias mananka/ullasa hatase hasa sukha ebam dukha." In the poem "Jejha Bate" ("In Their Own Ways"), Rath writes, "andhara samudra thiba, ame ta bhitare / chhota chhota machha pari keunthare / rahithiba, samudrare mu thiba jagare / tamara soundarya jadi puni drusya heba/kala kala kantha mane tama thiba thare / bhusudi padibe,…" These examples prove the stylistic similarities between Plath and Ramakant.

One of the most outstanding features of Sylvia Plath's poetry lies in her unique and subtle art of characterization. She uses an oblique and indirect method to paint a character. This may be seen in her poem "Mirror." The mirror seems to speak without using any words and yet we have the character of a woman who grows from a young girl into an old woman. The character develops through what may be termed different wordlessly sketched snapshots, which when joined together, make the full portrait. The poem consists of only 18 lines and offers photos in each of the lines. Thus line 14 asks the girl to move her hands, while line 16 informs us how the girl's face removes the darkness every morning while line 18 describes the nature of the picture of the young girl who has grown into an old woman to be finally drowned in the mirror, "In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman / Rises toward her day after day like a terrible fish" (Plath 173).

Sylvia Plath's poetry is characterized by the unique art of splitting an idea of herself into two similar images in order to arrest the attention of the reader. This is seen in the poem "Mirror," where we see the double image in "mirror" and the "lake" as metaphorically indistinguishable.

Curiously enough, we also come across the use of this device in Ramakant's poem "Dhaniprati Bhrutyara Ukti" ("Thus Speaks the Slave to the Master"), where an apprehension of death is tantamount to real death:

Often in me, there is an eagerness
To feel the moment of death.
The man who is no more
Must have clasped your hand,
And have looked at you with beseeching eyes,
And in that short, sad moment
All colours must have been black,
And the stars must have been
Mute witnesses to that perfidious hour.

(Rath, Saptama Rutu 70)
On that score, it is interesting to note that the Oriya poet Ramakant in his poem "Sri Radha," presents beautiful portraits of Radha: Radha expressing her anguish of love, Radha engaged in a quest for the Lord Krishna. In Hindu religion, Radha is the principal devotee of Krishna with whom she had a highly divine, esoteric relationship. Instead of making a full and complete portrait of Radha, the poet fashions several poetic images that convey feelings and experiences of intense love, separation, anguish of love, thrills, and joys of union. Such techniques not only enable Ramakant to introduce a novel feature in the tradition of Oriya poetry in the second half of twentieth century, but also bring his poetry close to the technique employed by Sylvia Plath.

Thus, a comparative study of the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Ramakant reveals striking similarities and affinities between these poets. The music and rhythm, the images, and the intricate stylistic devices that characterize the poetry of Sylvia Plath have their distinct similarities in Ramakant's poetry. Many of the ideas on life, death and trauma as well as illusions of love and relationships that dominate her poetry, have distinct echoes in the poetry of Ramakant too.

Finally, it is pertinent to note that just as Sylvia Plath ushered in a new trend known as confessional poetry, Ramakant too raised a voice that introduced a new trend in Oriya poetry, which distinguished him from other major Oriya poets, like Guru Prasad Mohanty, Jagannath Prasad Das, Sitakanta Mahapatra, Rajendra Kishor Panda and Haraprasad Das. Much like the American poet Sylvia Plath, Ramakant has inspired a large number of young Oriya poets for his new poetic sensibility.
Works Cited


