

## Landscape in Sylvia Plath's *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees*

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The word 'landscape' in the title of this paper includes nature in general and also a number of phenomena or manifestations that are parts of nature.

Human being is, as we all know, ultimately, not only a part and parcel of, but also a product of, nature or landscape. This is true to such an extent that human beings are moulded physically as well as mentally, emotionally by natural atmosphere as they are by their surrounding social, cultural, educational and similar environments. That is the reason why we have so many human races and cultures with their distinctly characteristic features.

It is said that man is known by the company he keeps. This "company" includes social company and environmental company as well. Nature is one of the primal influences on man. A man's physical as well as other related make-up is made by Nature itself. The view that Nature makes man physically could be substantiated by Darwin's theory of evolution. A number of theories from disciplines such as sociology, psychology, philosophy could be referred to in order to justify that man is influenced by Nature / landscape not only physically, but even mentally, emotionally, psychologically etc.

While very convincingly pointing out the relationship between literature and Nature (landscape), Patrick D. Murphy writes:

Literature and nature have been intimately interlinked in the long history of literary production throughout the world, especially when oral as well as textual forms of literature are taken into account. For example, the ancient Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* records the contradiction between the city and the wilderness and the conflicting values of their inhabitants. In addition, it builds its plot in part around the destruction of forests through the cutting and transporting of timber to meet urban needs. In China, an entire nature-oriented aesthetic movement, Mountains and Waters, developed and flourished for centuries ... and Dogen's thirteenth-century "Mountains and Waters" sutra influenced not only Japanese poetry in the ensuing centuries but also American poetry in the contemporary period.

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While one might say that Nature has always permeated literature, it has done so in varying degrees and has been critically received in vastly divergent ways. It has perhaps received no greater neglect in the Anglo-American intellectual tradition than in the early twentieth-century period of modernism and the early years of contemporary postmodernism. While many poets, novelists, and essayists continued to emphasize Nature in their writing, the academic establishment tended to ignore such authors and such an emphasis. By the 1960s in the United States, this neglect of Nature writing was initially rectified in the classroom more than in published criticism with courses designed to reflect the rise of the contemporary conservation movement and growing public awareness of a proliferating array of environmental crises.

Through the teaching of courses variously labeled "Man and Nature," "Nature Writing," "Environmental Literature," and "American Pastoralism" as well as the conference presentations and publications that such teaching spawned, a nascent literary canon began to form. (1998:xiii)

However, although the main premise that we — the human beings — are a part and parcel of landscape remains almost the same for both the Eastern and the Western scholars, it appears that there is some difference also in their attitude to environment / nature. Elaborating on this point, Vidya Niwas Misra states:

... The present-day concern of the modern West-oriented man starts with the assumption that we have to take care of the environment as it affects our living. On the other hand, the ancient Indian seer's or poet's (the Seer and the Poet were one) concern started with the assumption that we are a part of a larger existence, in order to become whole, or, in other words, in order to live a full life, we have to offer ourselves to the Universal or to whole or full existence. It is by offering alone that a realization of the whole is achieved and then one's life is fully lived. (1992: 57)

Therefore, as Nature is taken into account by a number of disciplines while studying human life in its various facets, literature — being a discipline having its roots in human life — also has dealt with the influence of Nature on human beings. One of the most important literary examples that shows the influence of Nature on human life is John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Through characters such as the Satan (appearing in the form of a snake) Eve and through

Natural phenomena like the Garden of Eden, the Tree and fruit(s) of Knowledge, Milton shows how the whole story of the emergence of human life is shaped and influenced by Nature.

The category of writers called 'Regional Writers' is a prominent example of literateurs dealing with nature / landscape. It is a matter of common knowledge that some of the internationally-known major writers in English in the category of 'Regional Writers' are British writers such as Thomas Hardy (depicting the region of Wessex County) and William Wordsworth (the Lake District), American novelist William Faulkner (Yoknapatawapha) and Indian fictionist R. K. Narayan (Malgudi). These authors show not only various facets of landscape, but they also show how company of landscape shapes human life and character.

In recent times, we have a number of studies dealing with ecological / environmental concerns of literary productions and practitioners of literature – old and new. As far as poetry is concerned, we have some kind of a branch of poetry called nature poetry and a number of Romantic poets have abundantly dealt with nature and its various facets / manifestations including supernatural facets too. Some scholars call literature of and about landscape as "green cultural studies." (Hochman 1998: 422-428)

As a result of literature written to describe / reflect landscape, environment, nature, or ecology, there has recently emerged a branch of literary criticism called eco-criticism. In this regard, one can refer to books such as Fred Inglis (ed.), *Literature and Environment* (1971), Cheryll Glatfely and Harold Fromm (ed.), *The Eco-Criticism Reader: Landmark in Literary Ecology*, Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and Environmental Tradition*, John Elder's *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and Vision of Nature*, Karl Kroeber's *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind*, Rueckert William's *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*, Patrick D. Murphy (ed.), *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook*, Baidyanath Saraswati (ed.), *The Cultural Dimension of Ecology*, and Vidya Niwas Misra (ed.) *Creativity and Environment*.

Sylvia Plath had been active as a poet since the era of the 60's onwards, an era which was full of a number of movements in all walks of life – one of which was a movement for ecology. A scholar on Sylvia Plath namely Sue Vice, in her attempt to trace the major probable influences on Plath and her writings – one of which is related to ecology, writes:

To see her work in less biographical terms, the moment of Plath's writing offers a particularly stark combination of discourses, both socially ...and historically – the rise of the ecology and disarmament movements, the legacy of the Second World War and, in the US, the end of the McCarthy era. ... (2001: 500)

Further she writes in the same vein as follows:

Although Plath's poetry draws upon a variety of twentieth-century events, including the Second World War, the bombing of Hiroshima, the medical disaster of thalidomide and general ecological unease, it is the references to the Holocaust – the Nazi's extermination of the Jews – which have caused the fiercest critical controversy. (Ibid: 503)

Moreover, since in her literary sensibility, Sylvia Plath, goes quite close to the Romantic poets, landscape is described and reflected in her poetry in general and in her collections of poems like ***Crossing the Water*** and ***Winter Trees*** chosen for the present study in particular. The reflections of natural phenomena can be seen right from the title of these two collections of her poems – "water" in the earlier collection and "winter" and "trees" in the latter.

As stated at the outset of this paper, the word "landscape" in the title of this paper includes in it Nature in general and a number of phenomena that are parts of Nature. In the above-mentioned two collections of poems by Sylvia Plath, we can see a number of elements of Nature (landscape) described and various facets of theirs presented to the readers by the poet (Sylvia Plath). Such natural phenomena include things such as sea, water, ripples on water, rain, rainbows, snow, the sky, clouds, the sun, sunrise, sunset, midnight, the moon, the stars, light, dark, horizon, the air, wind, mountains, hills, rocks, stones, seasons like winter, birds, and flies like swans, sparrows, bees, flies, animals like cows, sheep, lamb, snakes, jellyfish, different forms of vegetation such as trees, grass, leaves, lilies, blackberries, fruits, reeds, plants, flowers, buds etc. Moreover, some other natural phenomena like ivory, honeycomb, peasants, marble, deserts, orchids etc. are also mentioned in her poems chosen for this study.

Plath feels that Nature is the ultimate lofty, noble thing. Even the smallest things in the landscape seem to be the loftiest in their appeal. The landscape helps the man to relieve himself of his tensions, pressures etc. Similarly, those creatures who are a part of

Nature possess an innate wisdom of their own. Talking of these things, in her poem "Wuthering Heights", she writes:

There is no life higher than the grasstops  
Or the hearts of sheep, and the wind  
Pours by like destiny, bending  
Everything in one direction.  
I can feel it trying  
To funnel my heat away.  
If I pay the roots of the heather  
Too close attention, they will invite me  
To whiten my bones among them.

The sheep know where they are,  
Browsing in their dirty wool-clouds,  
Grey as the weather. (1971: 11)

At the same time, the vastness and nobility of the landscape make a sensitive individual aware of his smallness when he compares himself with the loftiness or magnanimity of natural objects. Hence, in her poem "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.," she says:

It is a garden I have to do with – tubers and fruits  
Oozing their jammy substances,  
A mat of roots. My assistants hook them back.  
Stenches and colours assail me.  
This is the lung-tree.  
These orchids are splendid. They spot and coil like snakes.  
The heart is a red-bell-bloom, in distress.  
I am so small  
In comparison to these organs!  
I worm and hack in a purple wilderness. (CW: 48)

At times, Plath personifies the objects in the landscape. Commenting on some of the natural phenomena, in her poem "Finisterre," she writes:

Now it is only gloomy, a dump of rocks —  
Leftover soldiers from old, messy wars.  
The sea cannons into their ear, but they don't budge.  
Other rocks hide their grudges under the water.

The cliffs are edged with trefoils, stars and bells  
Such as fingers might embroider, close to death,  
Almost too small for the mists to bother with.  
The mists are part of the ancient paraphernalia —  
Souls, rolled in the doom-noise of the sea.  
They bruise the rocks out of existence, then resurrect them.  
(CW: 15)

The sea seems to have been depicted as a disturbing element like warriors who fire cannonballs. Hence, the usages like "The sea cannons into their ear..." or "the doom-noise of the sea" in Plath's poetry, natural objects are likened to objects and scenes in human, practical life. In short, we get glimpses of different shades and visions of natural objects in her poetry. For example, see the poem "Insomniac:"

The night sky is only a sort of carbon paper,(CW: 21).

Or

Nightlong, in the granite yard, invisible cats  
Have been howling like women, or damaged instruments.  
(CW: 22).

Conversely, she also likens the state of an individual to phenomena of landscape. Here is an example from her poem "Widow.:"

Widow, the compassionate trees bend in,  
The trees of loneliness, the trees of mourning.  
They stand like shadows about the green landscape —  
Or even like black holes cut out of it.  
A widow resembles them, a shadow-thing, (CW: 39).

For Plath, widow is something like a shadow who leads a dark life emotionally. Hence, "A widow ... a shadow-thing".  
Or in "Whitsun.:"

"... the banked rocks sunning in rows, ..." (CW: 60).  
and  
"The waves pulse and pulse like hearts". (CW: 60).

Plath rightly treats even animation as a part of nature.

It is a commonly agreed and experienced fact that landscape is more everlasting than human beings are. Hence, she writes in "I am Vertical:"

Compared with me, a tree immortal  
And a flower-head not tall, but more startling,  
And I want the one's longevity and the other's daring.  
(CW: 26).

Man can achieve real solace only when he tries to be one with Nature. In the same poem she says:

Then the sky and I are in open conversation,  
And I shall be useful when I lie down finally:  
Then the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers have  
time for me. (CW: 26).

Due to urbanization and various resultant pressures in recent times, a great number of human beings have become rough and deceptive – both culturally and emotionally. Most of them are alive merely in the physical sense of the term and not in the human sense of their existence. This is very much in contrast to phenomena in landscape which are either alive or not and nothing in between. In "Stillborn," she writes:

They are not pigs, they are not even fish,  
Though they have a piggy and a fishy air —  
It would be better if they were alive, and that's what they  
were.  
But they are dead, and their mother near dead with distraction,  
And they stupidly stare, and do not speak of her. (CW: 35).

For Plath, artificiality is also a form of death. Therefore, in the same poem, she says:

They smile and smile and smile and smile at me.  
And still the lungs won't fill and the heart won't start.  
(CW: 35).

In her poetry, at times, we have purely natural, pleasant descriptions of landscape and its phenomena. Here is one such example in "Private Ground :"

The woods creak and ache, and the day forgets itself.  
I bend over this drained basin where the small fish  
Flex as the mud freezes.  
They glitter like eyes, and I collect them all.  
Morgue of old logs and old images, the lake  
Opens and shuts, accepting them among its reflections.  
(CW: 36).

Pure growth is the hallmark of the Natural growth. Such a growth can assume spiritual dimensions too. Resultantly, when an individual senses a spiritual growth, he compares it to some growth in the phenomena of landscape. Plath seems to agree with such a view and hence, in "Love Letter," she writes:

Tree and stone glittered, without shadows.  
My finger-length grew lucent as glass.  
I started to bud like a March twig:  
An arm and a leg, an arm, a leg.  
From stone to cloud, so I ascended.  
Now I resemble a sort of god  
Floating through the air in my soul-shift  
Pure as a pane of rice. It's a gift. (CW: 45).

Right from William Wordsworth onwards, Nature poets have expressed their desire to go away from the hubbub and crowds of urban settings as they rightly felt that urban life disturbed a man's peace of mind, unnecessarily filled a man with fatal tensions and worries and hence one wants to have a break from all these and get back his pristine peace of mind. The poets and sensitive people have suggested that this peace of mind can be achieved in the company of Nature only. In her poem, "Two Campers in Cloud Country," Plath seems to be expressing similar feelings when she writes:

Well, one wearies of the Public Gardens: one wants a  
vacation  
Where trees and clouds and animals pay no notice;  
Away from the labelled elms, the tame tea-roses.  
.....  
Around our tent the old simplicities sough  
Sleepily as Lethe, trying to get in.  
We'll wake blank-brained as water in the dawn. (CW: 50-51).

("blank-brained," i.e. free from tensions, troublesome thoughts which are a part of urban life).

As we know, once William Wordsworth had said :

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!  
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;  
The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;  
For this, for everything, we are out of tune; (1977: 568-569)

It appears Plath has been almost toeing Wordsworth's line in this regard when she says: Some things of this world are indigestible. (CW: 58).

At times Plath seems to establish a very close relationship with landscape and its various manifestations so much so that she seems to be treating them as her kith and kin. For example, in her poem "Purdah," she writes:

And should  
The moon, my  
Indefatigable cousin  
Rise, ...(WT: 7)

Further it appears that such a view of hers about landscape is comparable to the view of some people in different parts of the world who have treated natural elements as their kith and kin. One of the example of people who treated nature as their kith and kin is that of an Indian saint-poet from Maharashtra namely Tukaram who, in one of his poetic compositions, states thus :

The trees and creepers were friends to me,  
as also the sylvan beasts;  
and the birds spread charm with sweet tunes.  
This made the lonely life pleasant,  
Besides sparing one from praise and blame.  
Sky as canopy, earth as seat,  
and scope for roaming where one liked;  
Quilt and gourd for bodily needs;

a pleasant breeze from time to time.  
Tuka says, one conversed with the Soul;  
one discussed with oneself. (1948: 16-17)

The effects of Nature on human beings have been fundamental. Such effects have been both pleasant and unpleasant. At one point, to describe both these types of effects of the landscape on the human beings, Plath writes thus in her poem "The Rabbit Catcher:"

It was a place of force —  
The wind gagging my mouth with my own blown hair,  
Tearing off my voice, and the sea  
Blinding me with its lights, the lives of the dead  
Unreeling in it, spreading like oil.(WT: 15)

Plath uses imagery from landscape to indicate pleasant as well as troubled states in the life of a man.

The swans are gone. Still the river  
Remembers how white they were.  
It strives after them with its lights.  
It finds their shapes in a cloud.  
What is that bird that cries  
With such sorrow in its voice?  
I am young as ever, it says. What is it I miss?(WT: 45)

"Swans" are indicative of innocence, chastity, sinlessness in one's life. It is a stage close to one's childhood – a stage which passes swiftly and one is thrown into the arena of practical life which is full of knowledge – in the sense in which William Blake uses the word in his *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* – and which, further, is thought to be full of impurity, sin, evils etc.

Plath shows that landscape can fill a human being with the hope of rejuvenation. It shows us the cycle of existence wherein there is death and destruction of something somewhere at one moment and birth and resurrection of something somewhere at the same moment. There is pain and sorrow in the world, but there is also hope of the emergence of something pleasant.

I wait and ache. I think I have been healing.  
There is a great deal else to do. My hands

Can stitch lace neatly on to this material. ...  
 .....  
 The city waits and aches. The little grasses  
 Crack through stone, and they are green with life. (WT: 46)

Plath not only shows that Nature is pleasant, beautiful and soothing, but she also, at times, shows the ferocity of landscape / Nature. This is a realistic approach to landscape because, it is true that Nature is not only constructive and pleasant, but at times, it could also be destructive and unpleasant. Hence, Plath shows the ferocity of a natural phenomenon thus:

I remember a white, cold wing  
 And the great swan, with its terrible look,  
 Coming at me, like a castle, from the top of the river.  
 There is a snake in swans. (WT: 35)

These lines by Plath remind us of W. B. Yeats' poem "Leda and the Swan" and background of Helen's life to it:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still  
 Above the staggering girl, ... (1957: 441)

It is in this way that, I think, we can approach Sylvia Plath's poetry to find out her handling of landscape as reflected in her poetry in general and in her above-chosen collections of poems in particular. Of course, the present paper is only a humble attempt in this direction which means I am aware that there could also be better and more elaborate efforts in the interpretation of Plath's poetry from the angle of her descriptions of landscape.

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