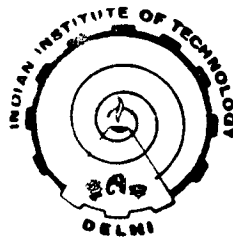


**THE FACE AT THE END OF THE FLARE :  
A STUDY OF FEAR IN SYLVIA PLATH**

**A Thesis Submitted  
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**By  
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(INDIA)**

**1987**

TO  
PROF. SHANKARANAND PALIT  
WHO  
INITIATED ME INTO THE REALM OF LITERATURE

## Certificate

I am satisfied that the thesis entitled "The Face at the End of the Flare: A Study of Fear in Sylvia Plath," being submitted by Mr. Pashupati Jha, is worthy of consideration for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, and is a record of the original bonafide research work carried out by him under my guidance and supervision, and that the results contained in it have not been submitted in part or full to any other University or Institute for the award of any degree or diploma. I certify that he has pursued the prescribed course of research.

June 12, 1987

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## Clarification

I have used British spellings in this dissertation and retained the original spellings in the quotations.

I have followed the conventions of the MLA Style Sheet (2nd edition).

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*Pashupati Jha*  
(PASHUPATI JHA)

## Abstract

The content of Sylvia Plath's poetry seems to reinforce controversial traits of her personality, and her violent, suicidal psyche comes close to justifying "blood-hot and personal" nature of her poetry. This results in a series of ongoing controversies, often quite unsettling. While some critics dismiss her condescendingly as a mere "period poet," or just another "Confessional," others acclaim her as "the first major woman poet in American literature." From "White Goddess" to "bitch goddess," she has been equated, as a tragic heroine, with Electra, Medea, and Cassandra, and has been hailed as a contemporary version of Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf. Such varied claims and counter-claims cloud and confound the horizon of Plath-criticism to such an extent that one frequently gets only "running commentary and shorthand notes" in place of a systematic analysis of her work. The razor-edge dividing line between eulogy and invective makes Plath-criticism often "adjectival" and "repetitive," veering round the vortex of her neurotic-narcissism, suicidal mania, identity-crisis, confessionalism, feminism, father-fixation, and mother-hatred.

What has been overlooked, however, is the pervasive presence of fear in her work, along with its inevitable variants like vulnerability, anxiety, threat, awe, panic,

and horror, because of which Plath's face seems to haunt the reader at the end of each flare. Her poems also gush from her responses to fear like regression and aggression -- the one to escape from fear and the other to fight back its menace. This pervasiveness of fear in Plath's work, and her responses due to it, have not engaged sufficient critical attention. Though there are peripheral references like "Sylvia Plath lets in more horror than Eliot or Frost ever entertained in their most terrible poems" as if she "lived on menace," there is a singular lack of any detailed critical study on this topic.

This thesis attempts, through a close and chronological analysis of Plath's work, to delineate the dominant emotion of fear and her responses to it, side by side Plath's shifting attitudes to fear influencing her aesthetic expression of the same. The approach here is primarily textual which has been facilitated by the publication of Plath's Collected Poems (1981).

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter I surveys the available Plath-criticism and introduces the subject of the present study. Chapter II traces the sources, circumstances, and varieties of fear, and reasons behind them, in the life of Plath. The biographical

references, as far as possible, are restricted to this chapter alone, and are used simply as aids to understanding the backdrop of fear in her work; they are not meant for any value-judgement. Chapter III takes up the general theme of fear in her poetry. Chapters IV and V treat respectively the theme of regression and aggression -- the two powerful responses of Plath to the sense of fear in her poetry. Chapter VI discusses the role and presence of fear in The Bell Jar. The last chapter, Chapter VII, sums up and restates the major findings of the thesis, concluding that fear, with its multiple forms and manifold manifestations, informs, creates, and controls the entire Plath oeuvre.

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