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## Depression in Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi's Selected Poems: A Comparative Study<sup>(\*)</sup>

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## الكآبة في شعر سلفيا بلاث وأبي القاسم الشابي: دراسة مقارنة

د/ أحمد طاهر عبده ناجي

أستاذ الأدب الإنجليزي المساعد قسم اللغة الإنجليزية

كلية التربية - مخلاف - جامعة تعز - اليمن

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### الملخص

تعتبر الكآبة ظاهرة عالمية تصيب الرجال والنساء دون أي إعتبار للثقافة وللمجتمع والخلفية الأدبية. إن سلفيا بلاث وأبا القاسم الشابي شاعران بارزان يعكس شعرهما فكرة الكآبة التي تغلب على شعرهما لأسباب داخلية وخارجية. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى دراسة الكآبة لشاعرين من بيئتين ثقافيتين مختلفتين على الرغم من قصر حياتهما. وتقدم هذه الدراسة أبا القاسم الشابي كشاعر علمي موازٍ لسلفيا بلاث شعريًا. كما أن هذه الدراسة تبحث في أسباب الكآبة في بعض القصائد المختارة لهما كقصيدة والدي والسيدة لازورس لسلفيا بلاث وقصيدي الدموع والكآبة المجهولة للشابي. استخدمت الدراسة البحث الوصفي المقارن والتحليلي لدراسة الكآبة في هذه القصائد. وتعتبر الكآبة الرابط الوحيد بين الشاعرين رغم أنهما لم يكونا معاصرين لبعضهما. تخلص هذه الدراسة إلى أن كآبة سلفيا بلاث كانت بسبب النظرة الذكورية والأبوية للمجتمع الغربي رجالاً وأزواجاً وكل ما له علاقة بالذكورية. بينما كانت الكآبة في حياة وشعر الشابي ترجع إلى النظرة الإستعلائية للوسط الأدبي الذي عاش فيه الشابي في تونس.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكآبة - سلفيا بلاث - أبو القاسم الشابي - الأبوية - الثقافة - الأدب المقارن.



## Depression in Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi's Selected Poems: A Comparative Study

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### Abstract

*Depression is a universal phenomenon that can haunt men as well as women regardless of any social, cultural or literary background. Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi are two poets whose poetry reflects the prevailing concept of depression due to some inner as well as outer causes. This study is significant since it investigates depression of two poets from different cultures despite the short span of their lives. It presents Al Shabbi as a paralleling poetic figure to Plath. The present study aims at investigating these causes of depression and to figure out similarities and differences between Plath and Al Shabbi's depression in the selected poems 'Daddy, Lady Lazarus, Tears and The Nameless Depression'. The presents study has used the descriptive, analytical and comparative approach. In spite of the fact that Plath and Al Shabbi did not live at the same time and culture, depression is the uniting factor between them. This study concludes that depression in the case of Plath is due to the patriarchy of men over women in America whether a father, a husband or any male-figure whereas depression in the case of Al Shabbi is due the patriarchy of the same literary gender in Tunisia.*

**Keywords:** *Depression, Sylvia Plath, Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi, Patriarchy, Culture, Comparative literature.*

**Introduction:**

Modern life is full of sorrows and disorders. Poets are always suffering because of their faculty to feel and react to every sensitive matters in this life. Poets' sensitivity is a boon as well as a curse. Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi are two poets from different cultures had undergone severe fits of depression due to many reasons; some of which are similar and others are totally different. Many critics assume that depression prevails twice in women than in men. They may be proved to be correct or not to be so. Yet, depression remains a human phenomenon which can be eminent in men and women whether they are from the west or the east. Reading literature refines the emotions and helps us be civilised. Knowing depression as a psychic feature and knowing the ways to overcome it may help us polish our behaviour. Literature as a mirror of life helps us avoid the mental illness caused by many reasons such as depression. According to an Arabic saying "Suffering is the mother of creativity", we find that unless Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi had this state of depression, they would not have become great poets. Nancy H. Steiner (1973) confirms this point when she says: "Sylvia Plath would have been a good poet even if she had not committed suicide, but not exactly the poet she has since become". This means that committing suicide is the real cause of making her a great poet. Yet, one of the most famous causes of becoming a 'good poet' is depression which leads thrice towards suicide. Even though, Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi has become a good poet after discovering depression as the main feature of his poetry. Many scholars like Kerru (1952) attributed his fame as a poet to his depression. In spite of the fact of the good quality of depression as a way towards creativity in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi, it is a negative behaviour from which the two poets were suffering.

Baldwin and Birtwistle (2002) in their book *An Atlas of Depression*, defined depression as "a common disorder with serious personal, interpersonal and societal consequences, affecting about (15%) of the general population and accounting for approximately (10%) of consultations in primary care. "They added that" Women are twice as likely to suffer from depression, and symptoms generally increase with age.

Freud (1917) defined depression in his theory of depression as: exaggerated feelings of guilt, buried and hurt feelings of anger and rage from childhood trauma and as a conflict between the superego and the ID. This theory depends on the three units of the mind that Freud had laid; the ego, the superego and the ID which are - according to him - always in



conflict. This exaggerated feeling is an anger turned inward. This anger remains buried in the unconscious. This unconscious anger leaks out in the form of aggressive behaviour towards others. Poetry is used a medium to reflect all the facets of life including depression. Depression influences behaviour and the method of thinking which can be traced in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi. Both of Plath and Al Shabbi lived during what was called in the early decades of twentieth century, 'The Great Depression' in between the Two World Wars. This traumatic period is reflected in the poetry of poets from the east and the west. Moreover, poetry is a form of creativity in which both creative poets Plath and Al Shabbi had excelled to present their dilemma of depression. Therefore, depression and creativity go hand in hand. This link is universal among poets from different cultures. Some critics like Kaufman (2001) argued that poetry as a creative genre leads to depression. Having a careful and insight investigation on some selected poems of Sylvia Plath leads to find that poetry leads to depression and depression leads to creative poetry. The researcher investigates the concept of depression as eminent in some selected poems of Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi. These selected poems are Plath's *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus* and Al Shabbi's *Tears* and *The Nameless Depression*.

### Objectives of the Study:

This study aims at investigating the concept of depression in some selected poems of Plath and Al Shabbi who belong to different and opposite cultures. These poems are Plath's *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus* and Al Shabbi's *Tears* and *The Nameless Depression*. This study aims at unearthing the factors that caused depression in the life of Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi. This study aims to figure out some similarities and differences between Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi regarding depression in the selected poems. The objectives can be pinpointed in these questions:

- 1- What is the concept of depression according to Sylvia Plath and Al Shabbi's selected poems, *Daddy*, *Lady Lazarus*, *Tears* and *The Nameless Depression*?
- 2- What are the factors that caused depression in the life of Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi?
- 3- What are the similarities and differences between Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi regarding depression in the selected poems?

**Significance of the Study:**

This study is significant due to many reasons. The first and foremost reason is that it is the first study dealing with depression between two poets from different cultures who were haunted by depression during the whole span of their short lives, namely Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi. Another reason is that it is an important study since it presents Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi to the international literati as a prominent poetic figure paralleling Sylvia Plath who lived five years more than him. This study is significant for those who are specialised in literature in general and poetry in particular. It is also useful for the learners of Arabic poetry especially the modern poetry in which Al Shabbi is the harbinger of Arab romantic poetry. Those who are interested in comparative literature will find benefit in this study. Moreover, some psychologists will find this study resourceful especially those who deal with depression.

**Method of Analysis:**

This study is a qualitative one in which the method of analysis is qualitative too. The researcher has applied the library, descriptive, analytical and comparative method of the present study. The researcher has used the method of content analysis to analyse the selected poems *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus* of Sylvia Plath; *Tears* and *The Nameless Depression* of Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi. The researcher surveys the secondary literary sources including the papers, theses, and the books on both Plath and Al Shabbi. A descriptive portion is given to the concept of depression as perceived by many scholars since Sigmund Freud in (1917). A critical analysis of the selected poems of Plath and Al Shabbi has been done by the researcher. Finally, a comparative analysis has been done on the concept of depression in the selected poems leading to the findings.

**Literature Review:**

Several studies were done on Sylvia Plath, however she remains a puzzling poetic figure because of style as well as the tragic end which was a matter of controversy among many scholars up today which is the same case with Al Shabbi. The studies on Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi were few especially in English despite his literary fame in the twentieth century. Moreover, the comparative studies between Arab poets like Al Shabbi and the English poets like Plath are still in the infancy of the literary studies. Some of the



studies have dealt with depression from a psychological perspective. However, the researcher has followed the previous related studies to lay down the boundaries of this study among other studies and to connect it to the current of literary knowledge. The researcher has started with the related studies on Sylvia Plath and then with the studies on Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi.

Cooper (2003) is a study on the depression continuum of Sylvia Plath. Cooper sheds light on the depression of Plath as a mental illness that haunted her since her childhood till her suicide in 1963. He argues that the Sylvia Plath Effect has influenced other literary men like Al Alvarez who had failed to grasp the essential difference between his own depression and hers. As a result Alvarez was about to commit a suicide like Plath herself. In this study, Cooper has discussed the concept of depression from the point of view of general practitioners like John Horder who indicated that her mood had deepened into a severe depression marked by constant agitation, suicidal thoughts and inability to cope with everyday life. According to Cooper (2003), Plath had tried to commit suicide many times, mainly when she was at the age of twenty which was associated with overwork and failure to get into a Harvard writing class and finally succeeded at the age of thirty which was associated with the failure in her relation with her husband Ted Hughes. This study focused on the reasons behind such depression from the family life, her failure in some scholarly events and her shocking of the infidelity of her husband Ted Hughes after a love relation with Asia Wevill. This study dealt with Sylvia Plath's depression from the continuum of her poetry which is a good mirror to reflect her mental illness as seen clearly from her verse.

Al Jumaili (2018) in his study *"The Representation of Negative Mental States in the Poetry of John Keats: A Cognitive Approach to His Metaphors of Depression"* presented a historical survey of the development of the term 'depression'. This survey starts with the definition of depression as a cultural term and making a difference between sadness, depression and melancholy. He argued that there are many definitions for this notorious term 'depression'. They range from a hateful feeling of severe sadness and lowness in spirit of the standard dictionaries to include pathological and clinical symptoms of the medical compendiums. Al Jumaili (2018) added:



"By the term 'melancholia' he meant a condition that today is referred to as one form of 'depression'". So, the term depression is a modern term. Melancholia was a medical term which indicates a long-running mental illness with core symptoms of causeless sadness and fear. According to Al Jumaili (2018) during the middle Ages the concept of melancholia witnessed a shift with a religious connotation associated with: dejection, sadness, sorrow, despair, weariness and inaction related to the committing sins. Such a shift can be found in some pieces of medieval literature as in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Al Jumaili (2018) found a change in conception of depression in the age of Enlightenment in which the term 'melancholia' began to acquire a clinical status. The nineteenth century saw an increased use of the term 'depression' and its related states in medical contexts to talk about psychological and melancholic disorders. Al Jumaili (2018) added that toward the end of the century, the term 'depression' began to acquire a pure psychological dimension. Sigmund Freud used the term 'depression' as a synonym for melancholia. He concluded that throughout the history, melancholia and depression attracted the attention of physicians, philosophers and writers as well who attempted to identify the concepts of these states and understand their nature to find treatment for them.

Panelatti (2018) in her study "*Sylvia Plath: A Psychobiographical Study*" provided an in - depth psychological study on Sylvia Plath's life. This study selected Plath as the subject for the psychobiography through purposive sampling, with the aim of providing a psychological exploration and description of aspects of her life, against the backdrop of her socio-historical context. The study explored and described Sylvia Plath's psychosocial development and the structure of her internal family system throughout her life. Panelatti (2018) concluded that Plath did not progress through the different stages of psychosocial development successfully and consequently failed to acquire the ego virtues of hope, willpower, purpose, competence, fidelity and love. She added that each stage of her life was characterised by parts-led functioning as a result of transferred burdens, imperfect care-taking, existential anxiety and traumatic emotional experiences which resulted in polarization of her different parts, which blocked the healing energy of her Self and aggravated feelings of worthlessness, shame and guilt. This study also added to educational



objectives in the field of psychobiography which affirmed that an examination of the lives of extraordinary women who used their creative genius to address socio-historical issues, could be a significant endeavour for future psycho-biographical studies.

Twomey (2021) in her study "*The Chicken and The Egg of the Sylvia Plath Effect*" discussed a controversial question regarding Sylvia Plath's depression: Is it the poetry of Sylvia Plath that leads to depression or depression that leads to poetry? She asked 'Do poets develop depression due to writing or are depressed individuals drawn to writing poetry?' She presented some opinions of each argument. Twomey added, Kaufman (2001) opined that even within the competitive world of creative writing for any genre, poetry has extremely high rates of rejection which can lower one's self-esteem leading to developing a negative self-image. This indicates that the negative self-image may lead to depression. Kaufman (2001) conformed that female poets are most likely to suffer from mental illnesses, most often depression. They spend excessive time in solitude. However, she presented the other face of the coin; that is depression is leading to poetry. She quoted the idea of Ludwig (1994) that female writers, of any genre, are more prone not only to depression, but mood disorders, panic attacks, generalized anxiety, and eating disorders. Twomey (2021), eventually declared a verdict that tragedy can be a pre-determining factor for many mental disorders. She added that those who undergo traumatic events are more likely to become poets, likely for the emotional release it provides, but separately are also more likely to develop depression due to the tragedy they endured. This indicates that poetry leads to depression and vice versa.

Omri (2010) explored the biography of Al Shabbi including his complete works, his life, his poetic theory, his romantic trend in poetry, and his psychological worries during the span of his life. This study is rich about the poet since the author is Tunisian. The study followed the descriptive and analytical approach. Some poems were analysed specially the most reputed ones like *Prayers in the Temple of Love* which is considered as a revolution in the Arabic poetry in which the old traditions of love poetry in Arabic were gone. Some poems inciting rebellion in the Arab Society were analysed such as *The Will of Life* which is the most famous poem of



revolution in the Arab Society. Depression, prevailing his life, was discussed in this study. With the poem, "*In the Shadow of the Valley of Death*", Omri (2010) added, Al Shabbi presented a more sustained view of life; that is the life of total depression. Some quotes from his *Letters* were critically analysed revealing some factors behind his melancholic view of life.

Badawi (1975) in his book *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Literature* argued that Al Shabbi had some links to the western Romantics due to the Arabic translation of western literature. The Romantic spirit imbibed from these translations was the cause of the haunting melancholy and sense of pessimism. Badawi shed light on Al Shabbi's new technique to run away from the traditions of Arabic poetry focusing on his way to compare the Western poets to the Arab ones with regards to nature and poetic imagination. Al Shabbi, according to Badawi, found that Arab poets lacked that deep feeling because their attitude towards nature lacked reverence to for its sublime life. Moreover, Al Shabbi found that Arabic literature was no longer suitable for the present spirit and the aspiration of life. This is one of the shades of his pessimism, melancholy and depression prevailing his life. Badawi also highlighted critically some poems of Al Shabbi related to his depression such as *The Strange Grief*, *The Orphan's Complaint*, and *In the Shadow of the Valley of Death*. Badawi stated that Al Shabbi's mood alternated between despair and a sense of the futility of existence on the one hand, and on the other, a passionate love for life. Badawi concluded that Al Shabbi finally welcomed death as the only means to end his suffering.

Aslani, et al (2013), in their study *Pessimism in the Poetry of Al Shabbi* investigated critically the pessimism of Al Shabbi in spite of the fact that he is the poet of *The Songs of Life*. This study explored the inner and outer links between him as a poet and his pessimism. This study explored three phases of pessimism in his poetry. The first phase is towards the world, life and the universe; the second phase of pessimism is of shock and surprise is the third phase of depression. The researchers concluded some inner factors for his pessimism like bitter fate, curse of life, alienation, doubt, his romantic views on life... etc. The outer factors are of political and social reasons. However, this study found his pessimism relative due to the reaction of poet towards the problems encountered in his society.



### Depression and Poetry:

Being depressed from time to time is a fact of life. Depression is more than just feelings of unhappiness, a mood disorder, and a medical illness that involves both the body and mind. Depression is an excessive sad feeling that makes someone think life is meaningless. Depression influences behaviour, method of thinking and makes one feel worthless, there is no hope at all. Depression is a global concern (World Health Organization, 2020). The WHO Global Burden of Disease (GBD) study ranked depression as the single most burdensome disease in the world in terms of total disability-adjusted life years among people in the middle years of life, (Murray & Lopez, 1996).

Depression has haunted people of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is still a mental disease of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Modern age is in total turmoil because of many reasons. 20<sup>th</sup> century had two world wars that afflicted the human life in general and the western life in particular. Accordingly, the 'Great Depression' followed these world wars; even "the ultimate emotional and intellectual consequences of the Great Depression were not finally erased from the mind of humanity until the end of the 1980s, when the Soviet collectivist alternative to capitalism crumbled in hopeless ruin, (Murray, 2000).

People from all backgrounds, ages and cultures can experience depression, yet people vary in how they express their difficulties and worries. Many critics, philosophers and psychoanalysts interpret depression from their own points of view; some causes are political or social or economic. Notwithstanding, some of them are due to creativity as it is the case with Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi. "Poetry, especially, is seen as an art linked to having some sort of a "muse". Poets may mentally assign credit - and, indirectly, their locus of control - to such a muse, inadvertently placing themselves at a higher risk for depression and other emotional disorders. And women, especially those suffering from low self - esteem, may be more likely to have external, rather than internal, loci of control, (Kaufman, 2006). Poets are greatly connected with feelings of anxiety, worry, fear and depression as a universal phenomenon. This is because poets are more sensitive than common people. Creativity and depression go hand in hand. This link between creativity and depression is



also a universal link between poets from different cultures. Having a glance on the themes of Arabic as well as English poetry, depression is one of the most prevailing and recurrent themes of poetry. Only the reasons are different so far as culture is concerned.

Poetry as a creative genre in some cases leads to depression. Kaufman (2001) points out that even within the competitive world of creative writing for any genre, poetry has extremely high rates of rejection which can lower one's self - esteem leading to developing a negative self - image. Such negative self - image is the main cause of depression. Another cause of depression led by poetry is that a poet finds a great gap between reality and the ideal world that he wants to fulfil. John Keats finds an easeful death as he escapes from his own world to the world of the nightingale as he is listening to her song. This easeful and joyful death is because of the depression haunting the life of the poet. Many poets were suffering from depression in Arabic poetry and English poetry. Many leading figures were poets of depression like Bashar Ibn Bord, Abu Alalaa Al Maarry, Al Sayyab, Nazik Al Mala'ika, Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi and so many poets. John Keats, Emily Dickinson, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sylvia Plath are some examples of English poets of depression. Modern age is an age of depression especially in the West. Arab poets were influenced in this regard by the western poets like the Romantic poets since melancholy is a romantic feature. Modern English poets, like T. S. Eliot, influenced Arab poets regarding depression. Moreover, America has been plagued by the Great Depression in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So, depression has become a universal phenomenon. As a result of this, it has become an urgent need to investigate depression on the international level especially in the field of poetry<sup>(1)</sup>.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Since I am interested in poetry since the days of school, I had a poet in my village named Abdullah Al Attar whom I found haunted with that sense of melancholy and alienation. I read Arab poets; I found depression a permanent theme in their poetry. Later on, as a specialized in English literature, I found the same phenomenon in English poetry. One day when I was teaching Sylvia Plath's "Mirror", I was astonished to find that such an American poet haunted by total depression in spite of the fact that she is young, brilliant and creative. That moment I decided to investigate the concept of depression in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and in the poetry of Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi to explore the nature of depression as a universal theme particularly in Arabic poetry and English poetry



## Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi as Poets:

### Sylvia Plath:

Sylvia Plath (1932–1963) was one of the most dynamic and admired poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She is considered to be one of the top 100 poets in modern age with more than (400) poems. A confessional poet, an extremist poet, a post - romantic poet, a pre -feminist poet, a suicidal poet – all these terms have been used (and are still being used) in attempts to define and explain Sylvia Plath's writing, (Bassnett, 2005). These are the different shades of her identity as a poet. Several studies have been done on Sylvia Plath. However, the soil of her poetry is still rich to be ploughed. In her poem, 'Kindness' she wrote:

The blood jet is poetry  
There is no stopping it. (18-19)

So, poetry for Sylvia Plath is like the heart beats that poetry means life for her. If "there is stopping it", there is no blood jet; there is no life. This famous statement (The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it) so often serves as the poetic manifestation of Plath herself, recapitulating the essence of her poetry with the connotation of vitality, violence and uncontrollability, (Inoue, 2018). The poetry of Sylvia gushes out of her heart whether painful or happy. In one interview with Peter Orr in (1962), she described her poems as cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is, (quoted in Inoue, 2018). The metaphor of a knife or a needle indicates the painful side of the coin of her poetry that leads to her depression. Her poetry is a faithful representation of her own life. It is the '*Mirror*' reflecting her life exactly without any presupposition.

As a fan of Sylvia Plath, I find a great difference between interpreting her poetry before and after her tragic suicide. The great volume of her poetry is love poetry, however the major works of critics value her due to her depressed poems. This is because of the focus of critics on her tragic end thinking that this is untimely death. Bassnett, (2005) argued that:

"Early responses to her poetry focussed on its darkness, on the imagery of blood and violence that appeared to prefigure her eventual suicide. Later, her work was reassessed, particularly by feminist critics, who drew attention to the power of her language, to the expressions of rage and outrage that run through her writing".



So, the suicide finalizing her life in 1963 is the main cause of this controversy over her poetry and the interpretation of her poems. Such evaluation of her poetry is not objective since many critics have bias especially those who have gender speculations after her suicidal death bearing in mind that she was oppressed by her husband Ted Hughes. Because of this biased overview, the positive side in her poetry had been covered and the main focus is still up today on her untimely suicidal death and the reasons behind.

Sylvia Plath wrote confessional poetry under the influence of Robert Lowell which was a new movement in the American poetry. However, she surpassed the confessional mode that restricts the expression of sad personal experiences. This group includes W.D. Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath. Confessional poetry began with poets who dealt with emotions and topics such as depression and suicide and most of them committed suicide. Feirstein, (2019) argued that "Being a poet, as well as a psychoanalyst, mentored by M.L. Rosenthal who coined the phrase 'The Confessional Poets', I often wondered why these Confessional Poets – all but Robert Lowell - committed suicide: Plath, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and Randall Jarrell. Lowell himself was hospitalized for mania twenty times in twenty years." This indicates that there is a link between the themes of confessional poetry, depression and suicide.

Uroff (1977) noted that Sylvia Plath, a confessional poet, put the speaker herself at the centre of the poems in such a way that as to make her psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of her civilization. This indicates that the speaker is Sylvia Plath no one else in most of her poems. He added that Sylvia Plath is not concerned with the nature of her experience, rather she is engaged in demonstrating the way in which the mind deals with extreme circumstances or circumstances to which it responds with excessive sensitivity. The mind of Sylvia is dealing with the inner psyche in which the experience is fuelled with the turmoil of depression as a main theme of her confessional poetry. The mind, according to Plath responds to its terrors.

The last period of Sylvia Plath's witnessed a prolific production of poetry which was published posthumously by her husband, Ted Hughes. She wrote



with great speed producing a great deal of her prolific career. Her collection *The Colossus* appeared in 1960 whereas most of the poems of *The Ariel* were written just before her suicidal death. This prolific poetry writing was due to her depression as worsened after Sylvia had recognized the love affair between Ted Hughes and Asia Wevill. This prolific poetry produced before her "blood jet" is going to be stopped. It is as if the last chance to jet blood as well as poetry. In the case of Sylvia Plath, it can be noticed that depression leads to creativity as seen in the last months before her death. Likewise, creativity leads to depression as noticed in the earlier phase of Sylvia Plath's poetry.

### **Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi:**

Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi (1909 – 1934) is one of the most prominent and despondent poets in the Arab world who was born in Tunisia in Al Shabbiya village near Tauzer town. He is famous for his rebellious and melancholic poetry. Speight (1973) argued that Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi is one of the most attractive literary figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century North Africa, and probably the only Maghribi author of the modern period so far to attain the stature of greatness in the Arab world. He was ignored by the literati of his country Tunisia. He was recognized and appreciated in Egypt by the editors of Apollo magazine. After literary recognition in Egypt, he was greatly appreciated in Tunisia and the whole Arab world. Two lines of his poetry were the source of his greatness as a poet which are:

If one day people should embrace life, Fate is certain to respond.  
The night will surely dissipate and chains will be broken.

(*Songs of Life*, 406)

During the Arab Spring (2010 – 2020), these lines were the slogan of the revolution in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Sudan. Yet, Al Shabbi was famous for his new trend in Arabic poetry, which is the romantic trend. He did not learn any foreign language. However, he was influenced by the translation of some western literary texts, namely the English romantics. Omri (2010) mentioned that "He [Al Shabbi] was a poet like the French Arthur Rimbaud, keenly conscious of his mission as a poet and a visionary". Within a short span of life about (25) years, he produced more than one hundred poems. Wahas (2018), argued that Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi, the romantic poet, was not a flash in the history of Arabic literature, but his



short life was a turning point in modern Arabic poetry. Hussein (1989) claimed that Al Shabbi's poetry shows remarkable similarity to the poetry of the European Romantics, particularly the English Romantics. Due to some similarities between him and John Keats, Al Shabbi is considered "the Keats of Arabs". Both of them lived a short life; they have similar themes and opinions regarding nature, death, love, eternity, melancholy and depression. The great similarities between Al Shabbi and Keats are his longing for death and his great passion for melancholy and grief. However, depression is the prevailing concept in his poetry. This is because of the loss of his beloved, the death of his father, the sense of alienation that he suffered among the literati in Tunisia and the romantic spirit that he had been haunted in and his heart disease especially in the late years of his life.

Al Shabbi wrote a book entitled *The Poetic Imagination of the Arabs* which was considered a new landmark in Arabic poetry with a new vision of poetic imagination. Al Shabbi discussed in this book the origin of imagination in human thought, the types and the elements of imagination, the element of imagination in the Arab myths and legends, poetic imagination and woman in Arabic literature and poetic imagination and short stories in Arabic literature. This book was a great shock for the Arab literati in which he differentiated between two types of imagination; the technical imagination and the poetic. The great shock of the poetic imagination of Al Shabbi was similar to the imagination theory of S. T. Coleridge in which he differentiated between the primary imagination and the secondary imagination. Al Shabbi denied the use of imagination except in a few cases. Al Shabbi finds Arab mythology deficient in poetic imagination, compared with the Greek, Roman or Scandinavian, Badawi, (1975). In spite of the fact that Al Shabbi was an innovative in his style and technique of poetry, he said that he was not against the literature of the forefathers of Arabs or he mocked their beautiful images or poetic techniques. He added that he refused the stagnation in literature, (Kerru, 1952). To some extent, Al Shabbi was not precise in this regard. This is due to his influence by the romantic ideals of the English poets like Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats and Byron through the translation of their works into Arabic.

The volume of Al Shabbi's poetry is called "*The Songs of Life*" which was published posthumously in 1955 in Egypt, Badawi, (1992). He wrote only a novel called *The Cemetery* which is still unpublished up today. His main interest was in poetry. He wanted to be innovative in Arabic poetry



claiming that Arabic poetry was in need to be developed in terms of style and content to be in tune with the hopes and longings of the modern generation. Hussein (1989) mentioned that:

According to al Shabbi, poetry is the vehicle through which the poet expresses his emotions, whether sad or happy ones. Al Shabbi also advocates the view that poetry is the source of pleasure and pain. In this respect, al-Shabbi resembles Shelley and Hazlitt. (113-114)

Poetry according to Al Shabbi is a world of emotions and feelings, a life lived by and for feelings.

In his poem "*Oh Poetry*", he says:

Oh, poetry: you are the spokesman of feelings and the cry of the depressed soul.

Oh, poetry: you are the echo of the sobbing of the heart and a strange ardent love.

Oh, poetry: you are tears which have clung to the eye -lashes of life.

Oh, poetry: you are blood, gushing out of the wounds of creatures. (*Songs of Life*, 102)

So, poetry for him is the spokesman of his feelings and emotions, the echo of the sobbing heart, the tears of life and the blood gushing out the wounds of the creatures. Moreover, poetry is a record of his own life and an image of his existence. Al Shabbi emphasized that the artist is to immerse himself in emotions and to live for emotions, for his life consists of emotions and feelings. This view of poetry is merely a romantic view. He dismissed the use of reason and rationality which was still a classical view prevailing the literary life even in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Arab world. Such view was appreciated only by the Apollo group and the Diwan group who paved the way for Arabic Romanticism.

### **Depression in the poetry of Sylvia Plath:**

Undoubtedly, understanding the nature and the major symptoms of depression will help us in our journey discover and examine the influence of depression on the works of Sylvia Plath who was one of the most talented,



brilliant, genius and creative modern American poets. She had a bloody battle with depression from the very young age till the last breath of her life, and, unfortunately, her depression was stronger than her. She committed suicide and died at the age of thirty in which she was found dead with her head to an open gas oven on February, (11, 1963) in her apartment in London. Her depression was the outcome of various factors, such as the loss of her father in an early age, her divorce, living in a male dominant society and her pursue of utopian and ideal life and the negative impacts of the Second World War. Although Sylvia Plath died very young, she had left a very good amount of literary works behind, and the most productive period of Sylvia Plath's writing career was the few months before she died which was from September 1962 to February 1963. She got separated from her husband Ted Hughes in 1962 after she discovered her husband infidelity. During this period, she suffered from manic-depression, and, then, her depression developed to become worse and worse which eventually led her to kill herself.

Sylvia Plath, as a confessional poet, reflected her sufferings and pains in her poems. Actually, her poetry was prevailed by depression in which she was bleeding using words reflecting her inner pain and agony and creating the most magnificent poems which are so heart-touching. Through these selected poems of hers *Daddy*, *Lady Lazarus*, we can see how Sylvia Plath reflected her manic-depression in both poems which were written in (1962) showing many symptoms of depression in each of these poems. In a reading for BBC radio of '*Daddy*' Sylvia Plath explains:

Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by that fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other – she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it. (Bassnett, 2005).

Here, Sylvia Plath declares the main purpose of the poem *Daddy* attacking the patriarchy of man in general not only her father. *Daddy* is a poem of mourning and melancholy which revealed Plath's state of fatherless who spent her life suffering from Electra complex, and in which many of the



symptoms of depression were reflected. According to Mohammed, A. (2023), Plath's father left her in a decisive phase of her life in which her father was the only source of safety and protection from the outside world. She tried to victimize herself in every possible way in the poem. She presented herself as a worthless, sad, empty, insecure, and alienated person whose father died when she was only "ten", and she spent her whole life feeling she is like a bare "foot" without a "shoe", and this description gives a sense of bitterness. Her father was the symbol of protection and power for her, and his death "Bit (her) pretty red heart in two". In addition, the absence of her father made her feel rootless and without any identity in which she could not even figure out her hometown whether it was Poland or German because "the name of the town is common"; this gives a sense that she felt lost in life. She presented several sites of a tormented psyche mingling history with psychology accusing her father and husband as Fascists. Mohammed, A. (2023) mentioned that "After World War II, it was revealed that almost six million people, mostly Jews, were burned to death in concentration camps. This mayhem was later called the "Holocaust" which came as a great shock to the world. Humanity was in danger." The Holocaust allusion<sup>2</sup> in *Daddy* is metaphorical. However, Otto Plath, her father, was of German origin and her mother, Aurelia was partly of Jewish origin.

Sylvia Plath has felt she was like a Jew tortured by her father as Nazi she says:

With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck  
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack  
I may be a bit of a Jew. (38-40)

(<sup>2</sup>) *The Holocaust allusion was thought by many western circles yet some great figures of literature did not believe in this event. Jews were thought to be oppressed, however, Adolf Hitler thought Jews were the source of evil due to their belief that they are the purest decent among humans which is against the belief of Hitler that Germans with Aryan decent are the most noble humans. This ethnic patriarchy was referred by Sylvia Plath when she compares her father to Hitler with "a neat moustache" and "Aryan eye, bright blue". This reminds me of the political patriarchy in Arabic poetry dealing with the Palestinian Jewish conflict in which the Jews are the oppressors and the Palestinians are the oppressed. The Sylvain theory of oppression is changed topsy-turvy. The Jews are no more than tormentors. Yet, comparatively, the Palestinian female poet Fadwa Tuqan finds the opposite of what Sylvia Plath had found.*



The Holocaust literature was a medium through which the suppressed pain and later on burst and outraged depression was revealed as a voice of a tongue "Stuck in a barb wire snare". Leon Wieseltier said that "But the Jews with whom she [Sylvia Plath] identifies were victims of something worse than 'weird luck'. Whatever her father did to her, it could not have been what the Germans did to the Jews. The metaphor is inappropriate ..." quoted in Rose, J. (1991, p. 205). Yet, Sylvia Plath, haunted by her severe depression, finds that what her father did to her, it could have been more than what the Germans did to the Jews. They were tortured – according to Sylvia - she was tortured by her father and the father-figure Ted Hughes as well. The three decades of her life are like the three Concentration Camps *Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen* mentioned in these lines: An engine, an engine / Chuffing me off like a Jew. A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen. As a result of these metaphorical concentration camps [the three decades of her life], she attempted three attempts of suicide to overcome the concentration camp of suicide to overcome the concentration camp of depression in her life.

The image of Sylvia Plath's father in *Daddy* is dark and black portrayed in many images like the "black shoe", "Not God but a swastika / So black no sky could squeak through", "one grey toe Big as a Frisco seal", "man in black", and "black telephone". This blackness of her father represents the depression that she has experienced in her short and turbulent life because of the absence of Otto Plath from the life of a still baby girl yelling *Daddy* to get an urgent help. This blackness represents the lack of vision of the sight of her father. Even the image of 'swastika' is so dark and so black because it cannot be seen through; it is too opaque for light to pass through. Therefore, 'swastika' is the symbol of oppression from which the whole depression is gushing out.

Sylvia Plath, in *Daddy*, has mingled her father Otto Plath and her husband as one character, the male dominant and patriarchal character.<sup>(3)</sup> She

<sup>(3)</sup> As an Arab researcher, I find *Daddy* as a love poem rather than a poem of rage because she wanted to be united with him through her attempts to commit suicide. Moreover, one day with her mother visiting his tomb, Sylvia tried to dig his grave to make sure he is inside. This is because of her manic depression haunting her life. For further details, see Lowe's article entitled "*Full fathom Five: The Dead Father in Sylvia Plath's Seascape*" on <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40755475>



has the only wish and bloody desire with both of them; the father and the husband; she wishes to kill the 'two': "*If I've killed one man, I've killed two – The vampire who said he was you*", (71-72). In 1956, at their first meet, she thought that Ted Hughes would be the father and the husband. Bassnett (2005) argued that:

"It was at Cambridge, in February 1956, that Sylvia Plath met Ted Hughes. Her Journal records the meeting, describing it in terms of noise and violence- 'We shouted as if in a high wind'; 'I stamped and screamed'; and in a letter to her mother of 3 March, she writes about Hughes that he is 'the only man I've met yet here who'd be strong enough to be equal with'. (16).

She found Ted Hughes at the first meeting 'the only man I've met yet here who'd be strong enough to be equal with'. However, this equal partner had been changed into a 'vampire' who "drank my blood for a year". This year is the worst one in her life with Ted Hughes who is considered by many critics the main cause of Sylvia Plath's depression after his infidelity was discovered by her. To the best of my knowledge, this infidelity had worsen that depression prevailing in Plath's life. Their relationship is bloody and violent from the very beginning of their meeting since the very violent kisses firstly by Ted then by Sylvia. Moreover, the suicide of his second wife, the Jewish poet Asia Wevill is another proof of his role in her depression leading to her tragic end.

Sylvia Plath had a wish of "equal man", yet she found only a 'black man', 'a black shoe', 'a vampire', 'a Nazi', and 'a dark swastika'. Accordingly, she preferred to commit suicide rather than to live a life full of patriarchal hegemony in which she had become a "passive victim" to men. She started the poem by victimizing herself, but she concluded the poem by self - empowerment in which she was turned from being oppressed to become an oppressor. As we notice through the final act of killing off the father as an attempt to supplant her grief and depression telling him in a tone full of courage "Daddy, you can lie back now / there is a stake in your fat black heart".

Another poem of Sylvia Plath in which depression can be examined is *Lady Lazarus* which mainly reveals Plath's protest against patriarchal



society that underestimates her power as a woman. *Lady Lazarus* is described as an angry declaration of war against men. In spite of that, *Lady Lazarus* depicts the fragmentation of the female body and the female soul as well. As a result of this, Plath wants to revenge on men with personae who are "merciless self - projections of Sylvia", (Brain, 2014, 119). This poem revolves around the use of death to establish a new identity, and by feminizing Lazarus, who is a male biblical character resurrected from death by Jesus. Plath wants to empower and give a voice to women. She wholeheartedly believes that death is the only way for her to get rid of her zombie-like existence and allow the rebirth of the best version of herself who would be stronger and purer and who could take revenge from her enemy. She further explains why men are her enemy; simply, because they never take her seriously who only consider her as an object of beauty and desire, as "opus" and as "pure gold baby".

Introducing *Lady Lazarus* for BBC radio, Sylvia Plath said:

"The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is she has to die first. She is the phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman", (Bassnet, 2005,113).

Like *Daddy*, in *Lady Lazarus*, Plath's depressive symptoms are revealed through victimizing herself presenting herself, especially in the first half of the poem, as a fragile, imperfect, ruined and sad person who lacks self-esteem or who does not exist. Accordingly, she finds death as the way to life that leads to a new identity (I am a smiling woman. Line 19). She lived in an era in which men were considered superior to women in everything, and the poetic ability and talent of men were seriously taken into consideration more than of women. Thus, this time her oppressors were not only her father and husband but all men in patriarchal societies. What is more, the male identity of Good and Evil has become an enemy to Sylvia Plath as seen in stanza (27) of *Lady Lazarus*:

Herr God, Herr Lucifer / Beware / Beware.

Maleness even as a concept is the enemy of Sylvia Plath. She is too shattered and damaged; she is "a sort of walking miracle" with so many painful psychological wounds. Sylvia Plath laments her weakness and



inability to move on in life in which her pain and suffering work as "a paperweight" preventing her from moving any further or developing. She also describes her face as "featureless" which reflects her deep feelings of losing her identity. She has just a zombie-like existence in which there is nothing indicating that she is alive; she is exactly like a mummy buried in life.

Depression in *Lady Lazarus* can be seen in the disintegration and fragmentation of her body into 'my skin/ bright as a Nazi lampshade', 'my face a featureless, fine/ Jew linen'. Burned to ashes, flesh and bone dissolve. My right foot, my hands, my knees." This destruction is by her male tormentors. This destruction is the aftermath of that depression which was fully mature especially in the last months of her life living without a father, mother in London and without a husband who betrayed her.

Depression is the result of the male dominance in every aspect of Plath's life. Plath identifies herself as a universal victim combining the atrocities of the Jews in Germany, according to her, and the atrocities of the Japanese as one line added in her BBC reading of *Lady Lazarus* (I may be a Japanese). This is a reference to Atomic Bomb hit on Japan at the end of World War II. Joan Lay (1976) mentioned that "As a woman she [Sylvia Plath] has been exploited on many levels in successive life times - she has been" the big striptease "the carnival sideshow miracle, and as the victim of Nazi atrocities is valued only as a "cake of soap, / A wedding ring".

*Lady Lazarus* is a death - oriented poem in which Plath reflects her depression through confessing all her suicidal attempts and used death as a tool to allow the rebirth of the New Woman, a powerful vengeful woman who can take her rights by her own hands, and who demands new identity and independence. She starts the poem with the confession of her previous trails of committing suicide which happened once every decade of her life. She declares that she had committed suicide twice "The first time it happened I was ten. It was an accident"; "The second time I meant to last it out and not come back at all". As well as, she pictured the upcoming suicidal attempt in which she finds herself as a dead and happy "smiling woman" who is "only thirty". She reveals a kind of disappointment in her previous suicidal attempts in which she did not succeed in killing herself describing this by "What a trash to annihilate each decade" She is obsessed



with death and committing suicide, and this, without a doubt, is the most common symptom of depression.

Furthermore, Plath finds:

Dying, is an art, like everything else,  
I do it exceptionally well. (43-44).

Plath finally is skilful at the art of death. This is because of the many trials she has experienced, so she does it exceptionally well.

These lines are the most significant lines in the poem because they portray Plath's theory of dying and suicide as the final destination of her depression. Depression in one sense is not negative. Depression has made Sylvia Plath creative and powerful. Depression endows her power, courage and resourcefulness. Depression in *Lady Lazarus* is totally different from the one in her previous poems. Depression in *Lady Lazarus* has made strong enough to acquire a new aggressive identity similar to the aggressive identity of her male tormentors. This moment of total dependence is a moment of rage; a moment of revenge against the male patriarchy that haunted her with bouts of depression. She does not want to remain passive. She wants to have an action. This action is leading her to pursue life in death. As the title *Lady Lazarus* suggests, she wants to have a resurrection to come back for tormenting her tormentors. Thus, "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air", (79-81). Plath, at the end of *Lady Lazarus*, has a new violent identity; the identity of a female Lazarus coming from the dead with a new life. Moreover, she is like the Phoenix rising back like fire to eat men like Ted Hughes who deviated towards Asia Wevill.

The resurrected Sylvia Plath is a "Smiling woman" with a strong and independent identity. However, Holbrook (2013) contradicts the viewpoint of Sylvia Plath saying that: "The triumphant note in *Lady Lazarus* is false: there is no real triumph, but a shriek of desperation, bewilderment and despair - a despair so schizoid, so deep, that it is utterly without hope, and this hopelessness can only find relief in recklessness". It is a shriek of total and painful depression that leads her to the third but successful suicide which was done well and no longer the cat - nine lives circle. Therefore, the triumphant one was neither Sylvia Plath nor her male enemies but 'Depression' that conquered her life.

**Depression in the Poetry of Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi:**

Depression is dominant in the poetry and the life of Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi due to many factors out of which is the heart disease that prevents him to enjoy life. As a child, one day he went to a nearby garden to enjoy his life, but he could not enjoy playing with children who were playing around. Doctors prevented him to play because of his heart disease. He finds his heart to be the major weakness that hindered him to enjoy life. He complains to poetry declaring that his heart is the source of this depression and darkness:

Oh poetry: my heart, as you know, is wretched and darkened,  
Full of wounds out of which blood is bleeding.

(*Songs of Life*, 103)

The heart of Al Shabbi is the sole agent for his depression for two reasons; the first is the physical illness and the second is the emotional one. He had a beloved who died at early time. The death of his beloved had also added fuel to the fire. Another great factor that contributed to his darkened depression is the death of his father in (1929). All these factors can be analysed in these two poems *Tears* and *The Nameless Depression* as a sample of his poetry.

The poem *Tears* starts with Al Shabbi's opinion that life is spent between two facts of life; longing and depression between which he is swinging. However, he clarifies that it is a universal fact to be depressed but he is fully satisfied. He acknowledges that depression is one of the facts of life bestowed upon him. Life has handed him so many cups nevertheless his soul rejects the cup of filthiness. Al Shabbi outset the poem:

Life is spent between longing and depression,  
Hope is spent between intensity and serenity.

It is the norm of life; Yet my soul rejects  
nectar in a cup of obscenity.

(*Songs of Life*, 133)

Al Shabbi is a rebel against the obscenity of his society. This obscenity is the outcome of the state of fraudulence that prevails among people. He is totally depressed and finds people dishonest. The speaker goes on to describe his melancholy, despair and boredom of life that harshly attacks him and makes his suffering so stronger than anything else. He declares:



No melodious tone, can attract my desire  
Except the tranquillity of my soul alone.  
No interest in life did I have except a few times,  
When the song of my depression declines.

(*Songs of Life*, 134)

In the poem *Tears*, Al Shabbi cannot find any sweet melody of life except the sweet one of tranquillity of his alone. He is no longer interested in such a life full of suffering and illness. However, he finds a few moments in which his depression declines. These moments are the moments when poetry is gushing out giving him some relief. As a romantic poet, depression dominating his poetry, he feels totally alienated within a classical domain of poetry. Classical poets could not stand his romantic views. This poetic alienation deepens his depression. Aslani, et al (2013) argued that Al Shabbi mentioned that he felt a strange alienation in this universe. This alienation is rooted day after day in the world around. This alienation is similar to the one of someone discovering the unknown and then telling his people about his far - fetched discoveries. No one can understand him". Al Shabbi is discovering unknown realms of romanticism, however no one can understand him.

The poem *Tears* revolves around his depression as a result of the loss of his past, his lost love and lost desires. The poet regrets his painful past that was wasted in pain, misery, anguish and despair. Life gives him nothing but some waves of depression hitting back and forth.

**Al Shabbi adds:**

Life handed me a full cup of desires, Yet, I could not attain  
the cup I wanted Life quenched my thirst with cups of depression,  
That I tossed them off. How painful my depression is!

(*Songs of Life*, 134)

In *Tears*, life has handed him too many cups of unattainable desires none of which is the cup he wants to quench his thirst. All the cups are no longer than the cups of depression. Al Shabbi expresses the complete despair with life that gives him only suffering and pains. Such pains are physical due to his heart disease and emotional pains due to the loss of his beloved. Omri (2010) argued that "Some of Al Shabbi's biographers have suggested that from (1928) he went into a deep depression as the result of the death of a



woman he loved". Moreover, during the whole span of his life, he was suffering painfully. This leads him to many cups of depression given to him by life. Al - Shabbi saw far more in the world than his personal sorrows. The cups of happiness cannot be found in the life of Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi. Accordingly, he finds that his past, present and even his future are lost. His destiny is to be in total depression.

Al Shabbi ends the poem *Tears* with a wave of longing and suffering bestowed to him by life. This wave has an image of death is eavesdropping between the graves as an evil spy. He is living the life of death in which his soul is totally tortured. He describes this wave of depression as:

As an image of death secretly moves among the graves,  
The pangs of the soul have tortured me in the hell of life.

(*Songs of Life*, 136)

The poem *Tears* indicates that Al Shabbi is put into the fatal depression by fate. He has no other option rather than depression and such fate makes no difference between his past, present or his future. He has a strong belief in the destiny of depression. Life is synonymous to hell.

Another poem, which is the most famous epitome for Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi's depression, is *The Nameless Depression*. In this poem, there is a clear declaration of Al Shabbi's depression from the title till the last line of the poem. The title echoes a strange depression that cannot be pinpointed. It is called the nameless depression. Al Shabbi declares with the first singular pronoun "I" that he is totally depressed. This beginning is abrupt in the Arabic poetry which is similar to the opening of John Donne, the leader of metaphysical poetry. Al Shabbi openly starts *The Nameless Depression*:

I am depressed I am alienated My depression is a unique one  
In the worlds of melancholy, My depression is matchless to none,  
At any layer of time, never heard by any.

(*Songs of Life*, 90-91)

Al Shabbi finds that his depression is matchless and incomparable because no one has ever heard about such depression. The only one who has ever heard the echo of this depression is Al Shabbi himself. He has heard this depression comparing himself to an aloof and alienated bird upon the top of a mountain whom people cannot understand his sorrows. This



depression is heard by Al Shabbi like a moaning reverberated by the recurrent voice of days and nights of eternal time. Painful images are given to this strange depression caused by heart diseases weakening him body and soul. By using beautiful visual images in an attractive presentation, the poet conveys to us the appearance of depression in his youth, and how he tries to abandon it with all his efforts and powers, however, Al Shabbi could not overcome such strange melancholy.

Al Shabbi further compares his depression to the depression of others, finding that there is a huge difference between the two.

His own depression is the most painful and eternal one. He says:

Peoples' depression is like flames  
By the passage of time, it fades.

Yet my depression is an anguish  
Settling my soul forever!

(*Songs of Life*, 92)

Al Shabbi's depression cannot be compared to any depression of other people because it is lashing and eternal. Even if the soul of Al Shabbi is crying, the body cannot hear that diluted cry of the soul. The soul is weakened by that severe depression that haunted Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi.

This depression is like a hell smelting his emotions as mentioned in *The Nameless Depression*:

My depression is too severe to smelt.

My emotions in the hell of pain.

Time has never seen So painful day and dream.

(*Songs of Life*, 93)

This poem is an outcry against the pain of depression in which the word 'depression' is repeated fourteen times. Though the life of Al Shabbi is too short, it is preoccupied with sadness, melancholy and depression which are the outcome of inner and outer factors. Mainly, the heart disease is the most notable factor which hindered him to enjoy life. Doctors advised him not to burden himself physically or mentally. Nonetheless, he wants to achieve many desires. This creates a discrepancy between his wishes and achievements. Accordingly, a hellish depression is accompanying him day and night. This hellish depression is attributed to fire and flames of fire in *The Nameless Depression*. Under the fire, there are ashes in which Al Shabbi's depression is being buried. He called them the ashes of the universe to indicate that his depression is a huge one like the depression of the universe.

**Al Shabbi claims:**

My depression is a vengeful fire,  
Underneath the ashes of the universe,  
That will recognise it one day.  
The Dawn is breathing as my depression is exploding.  
(*Songs of Life*, 93)

Thus, Al Shabbi's depression is like an erupted volcano. The moment that depression is going to be burst, it is the time of the coming of the dawn. This is a hint to the final moment of his life. The dawn is the aftermath of the end of this hellish depression that erodes everything before it even the heart of the poet. He ends *The Nameless Depression* comparing his depression with others' depression. Al Shabbi concludes that his depression is incomparable and unique one because it is severe, vengeful, harsh, lashing and eternal.

**A Comparative Analysis of Depression in the poems of Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi:**

Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi are two renowned poets of the twentieth century. They belong to two different cultures in which depression is the unifying factor between them. Sylvia Plath belongs to the confessional poets whereas Al Shabbi belongs to the Arab romantic poets (Apollo Group). They had a short span of life; Plath lived thirty years whereas Al Shabbi lived twenty years. Philosophically, they had similar views on life and poetry. For Sylvia Plath, poetry, "The blood jet is poetry / There is no stopping it", *Kindness* (18-19). Poetry for her is like the heart beats which meant life. If there is no poetry jetting, there is no life. This view is the same view so far Al Shabbi is concerned. Al Shabbi addresses poetry as a living entity:

Oh, poetry: you are the echo of the sobbing  
of the heart and a strange ardent love.  
(*Songs of Life*, 103)

Poetry for Plath is the blood jetting in her heart, whereas for Al Shabbi poetry is the echo of the sobbing heart. The source of poetry for both of them is the heart itself. The annihilation of poetry is the annihilation of life according to Plath, whereas poetry is the reverberation and the reflection of



what is going on inside Al Shabbi's heart. Thus, poetry for both of them means life and life means poetry.

The loss of the father is one of the main factors of depression in the case of Sylvia Plath as well as Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi. Plath's father died when she was ten whereas Al Shabbi's father died when he was twenty. Plath's *Daddy* is the representation of her anger with her father. According to Mohammed, A. (2023), Plath's father left her in a decisive phase of her life in which her father was the only source of safety and protection from the outside world. Her father stands for the male dominance including her husband and even the maleness of God. The difference between the image of Plath's father and Al Shabbi's father is that in the case of Plath, it is negative portrayed as 'dark' and 'black', whereas the image of Al Shabbi's father is positive. Al Shabbi does not find his father as a 'Fascist' as Plath does. He is in tune with his father since the very beginning of his childhood. Kerru (1952) mentioned that the death of Al Shabbi's father is one of the catastrophe that changed Al Shabbi's life topsy - turvy. This contributed to a total depression since his father was the supporter for him and a heavy burden would be upon his shoulder, (48 - 49). Thus, both Plath and Al Shabbi experienced depression as a result of the loss of the father. Yet, Al Shabbi has a positive image of his father, whereas Plath has a negative and dark image of her father as reflected in her poem *Daddy*.

The marriage of Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi is another factor that contributed to the depression of both of the poets. Sylvia Plath got married to the fellow poet Ted Hughes with whom this marriage was a failure. Ted Hughes was responsible for the total destruction and depression due to his infidelity regarding his love affair with Asia Wevill. Ted Hughes was a patriarchal character, a 'Vampire' as she called him in poem *Daddy*:

If I've killed one man, I have killed two-  
The vampire who said he was you. (71- 72)

Sylvia Plath had a wish of "equal man", yet she found only a 'black man', 'a black shoe', 'a vampire', 'a Nazi', and 'a dark swastika'. This led her to a tragic end as the sole result of severe depression. Similarly, Al Shabbi got married according to the wish of his father which was also a failure. Moreover, the death of his beloved led to this failure in his marriage and life. Aslani, et al. (2013) mentioned that "In the life of Al Shabbi, there was



a painful experience in which he had a beloved, whom he fell in love since his childhood, who died before uniting with her. As a result of the death of his beloved, he suffered painfully; his heart was filled with depression, and his mind was totally preoccupied with the idea of death.", (54). His father insisted to let Al Shabbi marry a woman whom he did not intend to marry. This added fuel to the fire of depression that haunted him all over the short period of his life. Thus, marriage is another cause of depression in the life of both Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi.

Suicide is one of the differences between Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi in spite of the fact that both of them were suffering from depression. Sylvia Plath tried to commit suicide three times in her life in which the third was successful. She mentioned this in *Lady Lazarus*:

I have done it again. One year in every ten.  
I manage it-- (1-3).

However, Al Shabbi did not even think about committing suicide. This is due to the Arab culture in which committing suicide is considered a crime to be punished in the afterlife. Moreover, he grew up in a religious family that has strict bond to the Islamic rituals. Al Shabbi, as a result of depression, thought about death as the sole solution for his dilemma in this life, but there is no trace in his works or other critical studies indicating to any attempt of suicide. Only, he was suffering from depression and the only medium available for him is poetry. Kerru (1952) argued that "Death in Al Shabbi's poetry seems to be the remedy which will save him from misery and open the doors of eternal beauty before him. In this regard Al Shabbi's pessimism of life apparently consists of an optimism of the afterlife". Al Shabbi welcomes death<sup>(4)</sup>:

Towards death! If you are tortured by Time, death has a merciful heart.  
Towards death! Hovering above the clouds, death is a charming spirit.  
(*Songs of Life*, 197)

Al Shabbi's image of death is similar to Plath's image of death in her novel, *The Bell Jar* when she argues: "Death must be so beautiful. To lie in the soft

<sup>(4)</sup> It is important to note that since Al Shabbi was undergoing a severe heart disease, he was totally conscious of his eminent death. Thus, he welcomed death as a sole solution for the depression of life.



brown earth with grasses wavering above one's head, and to listen to silence. To have no yesterday, and no tomorrow. To forget time, to forget life, to be at peace", (Plath, 1971). Thus, both Plath and Al Shabbi welcomed death as a source of peace, however Plath was more active to commit suicide to forget time and life and to be at peace. Moreover, she wanted to be united with her father in spite of the fact of her anger with him as one of the male patriarchal figures of her society.

The selected poems of Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi, *Daddy*, *Lady Lazarus*, *Tears* and *The Nameless Depression* present a kaleidoscopic picture of depression in their poetry. This kaleidoscopic picture is because of the difference in the culture, the poetic trend and the background. Regarding the culture, Plath belongs to the western culture and Al Shabbi belongs to eastern culture. The poetic trend is another factor; Plath belongs to the confessional poets whereas Al Shabbi belongs to the romantic poets. Their poetic trends affected both of them while they presented their depression. Plath in *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus* is blatant, outrageous and active against her enemies; the patriarchal father, the patriarchal husband and the patriarchal society, whereas Al Shabbi is alienated, complaining and self - centred. Al Shabbi is aware that the dilemma starts from his heart which is the major cause of his depression. Accordingly, he is not so active to overcome his depression and the hell - life that is living in *Tears* and *The Nameless Depression*.

In *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus*, Sylvia Plath reflects her suffering and depression as a result male / female patriarchy. She feels that, as a woman, she is subdued by all male characters including her father who left her in a decisive period while she thought he was God. In these poems, she mingles history with psychology accusing her father and husband as 'fascist' and 'vampire' to present a tormented psyche in *Daddy* and a fragmented body and soul in *Lady Lazarus*. She married Ted Hughes as an equal, however she found him as a 'vampire' who left her 'skin and bone'. Sylvia Plath in *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus* is fighting against the patriarchy of a male - dominated society. She refuses to be passive like other subdued women or like the Jews under the atrocities of Hitler. As a result, men should 'Beware, Beware' of her resentment and rage. Out of the ashes, like the phoenix, she will rise and "eat men like air". However, Al Shabbi is not suffering from



the male - female patriarchy or complaining of his father. He is complaining against his counterpart literati who ignored him in Tunisia. In *Tears* and *The Nameless Depression*, Al Shabbi is describing his severe depression that comes out of the patriarchy of the same gender; unless the Apollo poets in Egypt introduced him to the literary circles, we could not find any trace about Al Shabbi. He was challenging the classical standards of Arabic poetry especially in his book *The Poetic Imagination of the Arabs*. Thus, he was not welcomed at the beginning in Tunisia. The most famous lines all over the Arab world indicate that he is challenging the literary as well as social shackles. He declares that:

If one day people should embrace life, Fate is certain to respond.

The night will surely dissipate And chains will be broken.

(*Songs of Life*, 406)

So, the literary and social chains should be broken because they are against equality and freedom which are the same ideals that Sylvia Plath was fighting for. In *Tears* and *The Nameless Depression*, Al Shabbi is a rebel against the obscenity of his society that is the outcome of the state of fraudulence of people. He finds that because of this obscenity, people are not up to the mission that he wants to deliver to them. This obscenity is similar to the obscenity of Sylvia Plath that she finds in *Daddy*: "I thought every German was you. And the language obscene". However, Plath's obscenity is because of the fragmentation of the roots of her father of German decent and her mother of Austrian decent. This split makes Plath find her language 'obscene'.

Sylvia Plath in *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus* is more active than Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi in *Tears* and *The Nameless Depression* regarding figuring out a solution to get rid of their depression. Plath confesses her trails of suicide three times in each decade of her life. Many action verbs are used by Plath such as in *Daddy*, "At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you". If I've killed one man, / I've killed two". In *Lady Lazarus*, Plath is the most active one since she finds "Dying is an art" that she does it exceptionally well. Furthermore, she rises out the ashes and eat men like air. Al Shabbi is less active than Plath because of physical illness attacking his heart in which he finds that the major factor of his depression is an inner one. He is comparing his depression to the depression of other



people and concluding that his depression cannot be found in the whole universe. He is only swept by the mood of melancholy and alienation as a prime feature of his romantic slant unlike the confessional slant of Plath. Al Shabbi complains his severe depression as life gives him nothing but some waves of depression hitting back and forth, and finally he accepted it as a matter of destiny. Nonetheless, Sylvia Plath did not accept depression as a matter of destiny, she refused to be subdued by her husband and got separated from him in 1962 and prepared 'Dying as an art' to leave the scene in (1963).

Sylvia Plath in *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus* has used modern techniques to reflect her depression like the use of images, symbols and the use of myths and allusions whether religious or historical reflecting the miseries and dilemmas of the first half of twentieth century. However, Al Shabbi in *Tears* and *The Nameless Depression* has followed the romantic techniques to reflect his depression such as sense of wonder, sense of melancholy, emotions and feelings due to the influence of the western romantic poets on him. In *Daddy*, Sylvia Plath refers to the so called Holocaust by the Germans against the Jews in which the Concentration Camps are Dachau, Auschwitz, and Belsen. She compares her tormentors to the Germans or Nazis and herself to the tortured Jews as she believes. More symbols are used in *Daddy* like 'swastika' the Nazi symbol of oppression, 'the barb wire' is also a symbol of torture and many symbols. In *Lady Lazarus*, she refers to the allusion of Lazarus who is a male biblical character resurrected from death by Jesus. As the title *Lady Lazarus* suggests, she wants to have a resurrection to come back for tormenting her tormentors. In *Tears*, Al Shabbi is romantic in his style including the sense of melancholy especially in *Tears* where he is swinging between longing and depression and acknowledges depression as one of the facts of life. So, he finds that his past, present and future are lost since "Life quenched [his] thirst with cups of depression / That [he] tossed them off. How painful my depression is!". Moreover, he has a sense of wonder of the great and painful depression he is in. The same romantic features of melancholy and sense of wonder can be found in *The Nameless Depression*. The only stylistic difference between *Tears* and *The Nameless Depression* is the use of overstatement regarding his depression that cannot be compared to any depression found in the



universe. This depression can be compared to none but "a vengeful fire / underneath the ashes of the universe". Finally, it is noticed that Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi have their own technique to present their depression according to their poetic trend. The sole uniting factor is depression that haunted them till their tragic end of suicide in the case of Sylvia Plath and the untimely death of Al Shabbi.

### Conclusion:

Depression is more than just feelings of unhappiness, a mood of disorder, and a medical illness that involves both the body and mind. Depression is an excessive sad feeling that makes someone think life is meaningless. Depression influences behaviour, method of thinking and makes one feel worthless, there is no hope at all.

Poets are always suffering because of their sensitivity which is considered a boon as well as a curse. Twentieth century was an age of great turmoil to many people of that era including poets from the west and the east. Seeing the world prevailed with the aftermaths of the world wars, poets could not stand such destruction shattering people mind and soul. This disintegration is reflected in poetry here and there. Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi are two poets from different cultures who had undergone all bouts of depression due to inner as well as outer factors. Being a man or a woman makes no difference regarding the phenomenon of depression. Creativity and depression go hand in hand in which this link is a universal unifying factor between different cultures. Poets have their utopian world and may find a huge gap between their utopian world and the real world. The result is total depression leading them to their tragic and miserable end as in the case of Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi.

This study unearths the major causes of depression in life of Sylvia Plath and Abu Alqasem Al Shabbi through the comparative analysis of four poems selected from their poetry. Plath's poems are *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus*, whereas Al Shabbi's poems are *Tears* and *The Nameless Depression*. In *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus*, Sylvia Plath is reflecting her suffering and depression as a result of male / female patriarchy. She refuses to be passive like other subdued women or like the Jews under the atrocities of Hitler. However, in *Tears* and *The Nameless Depression*, Al Shabbi is describing his severe depression that comes out of the patriarchy of the same



gender especially the counterpart literati of his country, Tunisia. This is because of his challenging of the rules of Arab Classical poetry in his book, *The Poetic Imagination of the Arabs*. He was defying the literary as well as social counterparts in the Arab society who were not up to his mission. Plath is more active than Al Shabbi is, who is less active because of the physical illness attacking his heart in which the major factor of his depression is an inner one whereas most of the factors of depression of Plath are outer related to a patriarchal and male - dominated society. Both Plath and Al Shabbi have used different techniques while tackling depression in the selected poems. Thus, depression is a universal phenomenon that can haunt men as well as women regardless of any social, cultural or literary background.

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