



Exploring Psychological and Gender Concerns in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

Pratyasha Paul¹, Mohd Farhan Saieel²

¹ Student, B.A. (H) English Amity School of Languages, AUUP, Lucknow, India

pratyashapaul3107@gmail.com

² Assistant Professor Amity School of Languages, Amity University, Lucknow, India

farhan.chishty2012@gmail.com

mfsaieel@lko.amity.edu

ABSTRACT:

This paper aims to explore the conditions of women in the 1950s through the experiences of the protagonist of the novel. This paper studies the novel *The Bell Jar* on the basis of the concepts of feminist and psychoanalytical theory. This is a semi-autobiographical novel written by Sylvia Plath which explores the image of an 'ideal' women constructed by the society and the pressure it put on women, through the experiences and anecdotes from the protagonist's life. It also explores the psychological complexities of the protagonist and her gradual descend into madness.

Keywords: Psychological, Gender Concerns, Mental health, Feminism, Gender roles, Depression, Sexuality.

Sylvia Plath is one of the most celebrated American authors of the 20th century. Born on 27th October, 1932 she was brought up by two mixed parents. Her father, Otto Plath was a German and her mother, Aurelia Schober belonged to the Austrian bloodline. She was raised in a nuclear family of two in Massachusetts, United states. Plath's unhealthy mental health stemmed from that of a very tender age. She had a younger brother, Warren Joseph Plath towards whom she started feeling a sense of competitiveness from the time he was born. She had an unhealthy relationship with her father. She always strived to be her father's first priority and constantly made efforts to impress him. She had to fight for his attention. It is also said that she would go to the extent of learning names of insects in Latin to impress her father. Her whole personality revolved around getting validation from her father. She was molded into how her father wanted her to be. This posed a problem after the death of her father. After his death, she felt as if she had no purpose in her life. It was a traumatic experience for both her mother and her and they were left on their own to deal with life.

Sylvia Plath is known for her confessional poems. She had published a poetry collection and a novel: *The Bell Jar*, by the time she died by suicide at the age of 30. Her writings are derived from the experiences of her real life. *The Bell Jar* is a semi-autobiographical novel written by her under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. It is by this novel; she has come to be known for her critique of mid-century gender roles. The novel deals with the complexities of the female psyche. It was released in 1963, a month before Plath's death by suicide. Sylvia Plath's struggle for happiness and peace throughout her life is embodied in *The Bell Jar*. The novel is set in the 1950's America. It showcases the limitations put on women during that period. The protagonist, Esther Greenwood is a mentally ill young woman who struggles with the societal expectations upon her. As a result of which she feels alienated and her mental health declines. The novel delves into the psyche of the protagonist as she grapples with the complexities of psychological health. Esther is a college student who had received a scholarship and has moved to New York as an editor of a *Ladies Day* magazine. She feels like she should be the envy of all thousands of girls all over America but she can not bring herself to feel that way. She is an overachiever and works hard. The dark theme of the novel can be sense from the first chapter itself when Esther is seen obsessively thinking about the electrocution of the Rosenbergs. Throughout the novel, we see her fascination with death. The way a person died matters much more to her than who dies. Even though life played out pretty well for her, she does not feel enthusiastic or excited for her achievement. She feels like any other girl would kill to be in her place but she felt empty.

The conflict between the society's expectations and Esther's dreams is what the novel is primarily focused on. Esther wanted to create her own life and make her own decisions. Her unwillingness to get married and become a mother is quite evident throughout the novel. Through Esther, Sylvia Plath describes women's experience of being expected to desire only two things in life: marriage and motherhood. The image of an 'ideal' woman in 1950s America was a suburban housewife who cared for the home and the children. The American propaganda promoted image of women with their feminine hairdos and delicate dresses, tending to the hearth and the home. Marriage was considered very important. Stereotype was that women went to college to get a Mrs. degree that is to get a husband. But Esther does not agree with such alteration of character. She did not want to be conditioned into serving men. She despised the idea of serving men in any way. She sees marriage life as stagnant. She craves change and excitement. She says that when a man comes to like her, it reduces him to ordinariness. She starts finding faults in them. This is one of the reasons she did not want to get married. As she shares her disappointed feelings regarding marriage here:

The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be in a place from where the arrow shoots off. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off from all the directions myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket. (73).

She tries to imagine herself as a married woman. It would mean waking up at seven and cooking breakfast for her husband, doing household chores and then waiting for her husband to return home. She thinks of this lifestyle as a waste for a well-educated girl. She has observed Buddy Willard's, her then boyfriend, mother who had to cook and clean and wash from day to night despite having been a private school teacher herself. She knew that despite a man showering affection on his wife, he just wanted her to 'flatten out underneath his feet' like a kitchen mat. Being married also means that she has to bear children. She remembers what Buddy had told her about motherhood. He says to her that she would not be inclined to write poems after having children. She views marriage and motherhood as slavery:

So, I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private totalitarian state. (75).

She also cannot imagine herself being a mother. She observes that was so easy for women to accept motherhood while she felt so unmaternal. She feels that motherhood will drive her mad: "Why was I so unmaternal and apart? Why couldn't I dream of devoting myself to a baby after fat pulling baby like Dodo Conway? If I had to wait on a baby all day, I would go mad." (198)

Her relationship with her boyfriend, Buddy Willard is supposed to be what every conventional relationship was at that time. Plath utilizes his character to represent the attitude of most men during that period. Buddy is a clinical med student from Yale. Esther's mother and grandmother always hint around her about what a fine, clean boy Buddy was. He is the perfect image of a gentleman. Athletic, extremely handsome, intelligent and belongs to a good family. Even though she does not have any romantic feelings for him, she is still with him due to what the society expects her to do. Single women were considered undesirable back then. She thinks of Buddy as the perfect partner until she learns that he had indulged in a sexual relationship with a waitress. This gives her quite a shock as she is very inexperienced about relationships between men and women and had always thought of Buddy being the clean, virgin guy. She asks her seniors in college about this 'other women' situation and they tell her that usually men are like that and she should just accept it without questioning it as long as they are not married. The double standard of the society disturbs her. She recalls how every time she visited Buddy's mom, she would scrutinize her as if to find out if she was still a virgin. She is angry that Buddy treated her as if she was way more experienced than him while he pretended to be pure

Also, we must note that there was no proper form of contraception during that time. So, if a girl got pregnant before marriage, it was considered sordid and they were sent away to distant homes for wayward girls. In chapter 7, she mentions an article written by a married woman lawyer. It stated all the reasons a girl should remain a virgin and not sleep with anyone but her husband only after they have been married. The article stated that the best men wanted to be the one to teach their wives about sex. They would try to persuade a woman to sleep with them but as soon as she gave in, they would lose all respect for her. Esther feels that the article did not specify how a girl felt. She can not stand the idea of not marrying a pure man when she herself has saved her virginity: "I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not." (71)

She realizes that it was very difficult for her to find a man who was pure at the age of twenty-one. So, she determines to lose her virginity. She thinks that if a man can do it, why can not she. He becomes so obsessed with the idea of purity that she begins to see the world being divided into two groups: pure and not pure. She says:

I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn't, and this seemed the only significant difference between one person and another. I thought a spectacular change would come over me the day I crossed the borderline. (72)

The rest of the novel, she searches for a 'proper sort of man' for her to lose her virginity to. We can consider this a way for Esther to liberate herself. Her virginity becomes a burden to her. She starts thinking of it as a form of shackle placed on the society on her. A 'good girl' was not supposed to indulge in any sexual activities before marriage. Her losing her virginity to a man of her liking can be considered as a form of empowerment and freedom for her. In the novel, Plath observes that obstetrics and gynaecology as patriarchal institutions, in which men took the control of women's bodies under the disguise of genuine care. She brings out her observations through an explicit scene where Buddy Willard takes Esther to watch a woman giving birth. Buddy tells her not to see the scene as she wouldn't wish to become a mother after witnessing it. She describes the delivery table as some sort of torture table. As she mentioned:

I was so struck by the sight of the table where they were lifting the woman I didn't say a word. It looked like some awful torture table, with these metal stirrups sticking up in mid-air at one end and all sorts of instruments and wires and tubes I couldn't make out properly at the other. (61)

Esther sees the woman lying on her back, with her knees drawn up and spread wide apart by stirrups. This position was considered ideal for child birth. But she observes that the woman is not even in control of her own body. The drug given to her will make her forget about the pain she had to endure during the process. "I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent." (57) The medicine puts the woman into a 'Twilight sleep' as described by Buddy. Twilight sleep was a mixture of the analgesic morphine and the amnesiac scopolamine. Although women on this medication, screamed and thrashed in pain during childbirth, they woke up with no remembrance of the pain. The medicine is given to them to make them forget about the pain so that they wouldn't be reluctant to get pregnant the next time. This is some sort of objectification of women as merely a baby making machine. This leads us to believe that health of women was not considered given much importance. They were only seen as potential baby makers. We can observe this in the incident of Esther's first sexual encounter, which leaves her haemorrhaging. She goes to the doctor who treats her like just another problem to solve and not as a human being. She observes:

"Ouch!" I winced at a particularly bad jab. The doctor whistled. "You're one in a million." "What do you mean?" "I mean it's one in a million it happens to like this. The doctor spoke in a low, curt voice to the nurse... "But can you fix it?" The doctor laughed. "Oh, I can fix it, all right". (223)

His use of neuter pronoun, his laugh and his unwillingness to address Esther as a responsible adult are all depersonalizing experiences. He does not seem to be interested in establishing a supporting relationship with her. He treats her like a mere object on which he can showcase his expertise. We notice the same kind of depersonalizing attitude in Dr. Gordon too. He does not try to make any meaningful conversation with Esther. Being a psychiatrist, his duty is to try and understand the patient. But does none of that. He just asks her what her problem was and then goes on to ask her about her college which is totally unrelated to her problem. He subjects her to electroshock therapy which was considered the only treatment for the mentally ill during that time. He 'seemed so slow to understand' and takes just one incident to conclude that she is mentally ill and need the physical intervention of ECT. But under

Dr. Nolan's care, we seen Esther slowly recovering. Being a female, Dr. Nolan understands her problems better. She treats her as a human and not as just another case to solve.

Sylvia Plath's struggle for happiness and peace throughout her life is embodied in the novel. She brings out her story through the experiences of Esther. Esther feels different and alienated from the world around her. She had always been a high achiever but suddenly she feels off tracked. When her boss, Jay Cee asks her what she wanted to become, she is at loss of words as she does not have any answer to that:

What I always thought I had in mind was getting some big scholarship to graduate school or a grant to study all over Europe, and then I thought I'd be a professor and write books of poems, or write books poems and be an editor of some sort. Usually, I had all these plans on the top of my tongue. 'I don't know,' I heard myself say. I felt a deep shock hearing myself say that, because the minute I said it, I knew it was true (27).

She feels the pressure to know herself due to the women like Jay Cee and Doreen around her. But she is not ready yet for her self-discovery. This feeling of uncertainty makes her feel powerless and out of control. Buddy's infidelity adds to this. Esther is a prey to a Major Depressive Disorder. It is a mental disorder characterised by a persistent low mood that is accompanied by low self-esteem and loss of interest in normally enjoyable activities. She feels like failure. She starts listing everything she is bad at. She can not think of anything she is good at. She feels 'dreadfully inadequate'. She considers herself to be a terrible dancer, nor could she sing a song. She had problem balancing and always fell down while walking through a narrow board with hands out or books on her head in the gym class. She could not ride a horse or ski, she couldn't speak German, read Hebrew or write Chinese. The only thing she was good at was winning scholarships which she thinks is not enough. She wants to be everything at one while realizing she can not be everything at once. Sylvia Plath uses a fig tree as an analogy to describe Esther's feelings. As depicted:

"I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet." (67)

She is conflicted between wanting a normal life with a husband and children and a life of her own where she can be a successful woman without the burden of a family. On reaching home, she learns that she had not been accepted for the writing course which she was very much looking forward to. This pushes her deeper into the spiral of self-doubt. She is plagued by indecisiveness which leads her to nowhere except confusion and self-doubt and adds to her feeling out of control. She feels like a failure. She questions herself that why could not, she be like every other woman and have kids. She believes that she will never live up to the expectations placed on her. Neither she wishes for marriage nor she considers herself well equipped to make a life of her own. This is when she starts planning her own demise. Esther also suffers from Neurosis. Neurosis is a functional mental disorder which involves distress but not delusions or hallucinations. This disorder is often caused due to the poor ability to adapt to one's environment, an inability to change one's life patterns and inability to develop a richer, more complex, more satisfying personality. We can observe Esther having trouble adapting to the glamorous lifestyle of New York. She is not excited at all. She feels different and empty which adds to her feeling of alienation. She feels still and empty like the eye of a tornado.

The psychoanalytical theory given by Sigmund Freud can be applied to analyse Esther's characteristics. The basic theory proposes that a person's development is determined by often forgotten events in early childhood rather than inherited traits alone. It assumes that individuals have unconscious thoughts, desires, memories and feelings which may influence their behaviours and perception. Plath's ambivalent feeling towards men have been portrayed through Esther. Plath never had a smooth relation with her father. She expresses her resentment towards her father in her poem 'Daddy.' She used to worship him during her youth but grows to resent him as he was a fascist person. Her unresolved resentment towards her father manifested as her ambivalent attitude towards men.

Esther in the novel, displays Oedipus complex. This is a concept developed by Sigmund Freud based on the Greek myth of Oedipus. According to this psychoanalytical theory, every individual passes through a stage in theory life where they desire the parent of the opposite sex in an unconscious level. From this concept, another concept called the Penis envy develops. The latter is a stage in Freud's theory of female psychosexual development in which young girls experience anxiety when they realize, they do not have a penis. Freud believed that the penis envy begins in females during the age of three to six years when they notice their lack of a penis. They blame their mother for this and seek identification with their father. He believed that this persists throughout the life and plays a role in the mental health of a female. We can observe this in Esther. Esther has lost her father in an early age so she did not have anyone to seek identification with during her development. This manifests as resentment towards male. She is not particularly romantically interested in any of her partners and test them for perfection. Her relationship with Buddy is not satisfactory and she is not even sexually attracted to him. The sight of him naked makes her think about 'turkey neck and turkey gizzards.' She also does not find it arousing to be naked in front of him. She noticed:

But undressing in front of Buddy suddenly appealed to me about as much as having posture picture taken at college, where you have to stand in front of the camera, knowing all the time that a picture of you stark naked, both full view and side view, is going into the college gym files to be marked A or B or C or D depending on how straight you are. (60)

Penis envy in her manifests as reluctance to serve men. It is also perhaps the reason for her anger towards the double standards of the society. No one questions a man if he indulges in sexual activity before marriage but when a woman does it, it is considered scandalous and wrong.

Esther is a very gloomy person. Her thoughts are plagued with death. We can observe her growing fascination with death throughout the book. She contemplates different ways a person could die and different ways she could kill herself. Feeling lost and powerless is something most women feel in their lives. But what makes Esther different is her way of dealing with those thoughts. She feels like, she cannot discuss or think about; what she is feeling- her personal failure, sufferings and death. She is a very pessimistic person. Instead of looking at a brighter alternative, she thinks that killing herself is the only option. She feels alienated from the world around her. She knows that the glamorous world of New York should excite her but she can not bring herself to feel that way. Her relationships with men are also filled with disappointment and misunderstandings. She starts viewing the world

through a pessimistic lens. This creates a sense of unreality and disconnection which grows and finally leads to attempted suicide and madness. We can compare Esther to a person who self-harms or has an eating disorder. People who lose control of their lives often resort to this measure to regain control. Esther resorts to committing suicide to regain power. Her methods of dealing with problems are unconventional. This is due to her alienation. She feels different from everyone around her. She has a “sickness of the will,” because when she sees any small defect in herself, she sees it as being something monumentally wrong with her. She thinks of her defects as something that can not be improves. She is clever and witty but can not respond to any negative situation lightly. Due to her abnormal response to her problems, she is being driven more and more, by society and her own character and actions, into alienation, into real, physical sickness. Her lack of moral support, sexism and her continual sense of failure results into her spiralling into serious depression. Esther is surrounded by her pessimism. She thinks of it as a ‘bell jar’ placed upon her. She cannot escape it. She describes: “It would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air. The air of the bell jar wadded round me and I couldn’t stir.” (165)

Sylvia Plath uses the bell jar as a metaphor for alienation and madness. Esther is trapped inside a bell jar which prevents her from connecting with the outer world. We can draw comparison between her and the protagonist of *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka. Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to find that he had transformed into a bug. He can not communicate his emotions as no one understands what he speaks. He says, “I cannot make you understand. I can not make anyone understand what is happening inside me. I can not even explain it to myself.” He is kept locked in his room and is not allowed outside due to his absurdity. We can observe the same in Esther too. She can not communicate her feelings to anyone and keeps stewing in her own melancholy which finally leads to her suicide attempt. The metamorphosis into a bug and the bell jar both are used as metaphors to depict alienation and disconnection.

Esther slowly descends into madness. She can not eat, sleep, write or read. This forces her to consult a psychiatrist Dr. Gordon. She tells him that she has given up changing clothes or washing her hair for three weeks as she could not see the point of doing these trivial things. But he seemed to be very nonchalant about her issues. He asks her about her college and dismisses her. He does not try to understand her and tells her to undergo electroshock therapy. We can observe her evident fear of electrocution in the beginning when she thinks about the death of the Rosenbergs’. But she does not have any option rather than facing her anxieties. But the electroshock therapy leaves her disappointed and make her more determined to commit suicide. She contemplates slitting her wrist or drowning herself or even hang herself but she goes with the idea of overdosing herself on sleeping pills. She recovers from her suicide attempt and goes to a female psychiatrist Dr. Nolan. Dr. Nolan being a woman herself, understands her and treats her with tenderness. Under her treatment, Esther finds herself breaking out of the bell jar. She gets attracted to a respectable man Irwin who is a maths professor and finally loses her virginity. She observes that the bell jar has lifted but it hangs over her and can descend anytime again.

What makes this novel a compelling read is the unconventional ways in which Esther deals with her problems. Sylvia Plath brings out anecdotes to expose the societal presumptions on women in the 1950s. She uses Esther’s sentiments and responses as a portrayal of what women felt. The novel is also semi-autobiographical so these incidents have had happened with Sylvia Plath too. Sylvia Plath had committed suicide thrice in her life, the final attempt being her successful one. The novel may end on a hopeful note that Esther finally tries to lead a normal life but in reality, she was not successful. *The bell jar* indeed dropped. Sylvia Plath could not escape the destiny that Esther was trying to avoid. This blooms a sense of disappointment among the readers. It is to keep in mind that Sylvia Plath was a troubled person and was plagued with depression. Suicide seemed to be her only way out of this labyrinth of sufferings. But it is not a conventional method. It must not be glamourised.

REFERENCES:

1. Chandran, Navya. “A Psychoanalytical Study of Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*.” *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies*. Vol. 3, No. 2, 2016.
2. Rosamund. “Exploring Feminism in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*.” *Modern Women*. 3 Sept. 2023.
3. Hilbrandt, Donna. “Feminist Aspects in *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath.” *Owlcation*. 2023.
4. Dubey, Adarshi. “*The Bell Jar*’s Artistic Exploration of Depression: A Study of Sylvia Plath’s Poetics and Feminist Identity.” *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*. 2023.
5. Lucas, V. *The Bell Jar*. London, 1963.
6. Villines, Zawn. “What is Penis Envy, and is It Real.” *Medical News Today*. 2022.
7. Ferretter, Luke. “Just like the Sort of Drug a Man Would Invent”: *The Bell Jar* and the Feminist Critique of Women’s Health Care.” *Plath Profiles: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Sylvia Plath Studies*. vol. 1, no. 1, 2008.