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## RE-ORDERING AND ASSERTION OF FEMININE IDENTITY IN SYLVIA PLATH'S THE BELL JAR

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### Abstract

Women's life writing has always been potential and they can be considered as an intersection of feminine sexuality and textuality. *The Bell Jar* can be acclaimed as the embodiment of the dynamic and passive life experiences of Plath herself, which also questions the social and cultural context they live in. Metaphorical representation of identity, duality, and retreat from masculine language are the main ideas used to reveal how the text function as the critique of the cultural construction of feminine tropes. 'Mirroring the self' is a concept used which overpowers the existing patriarchal notions about the female body and mind. The paper looks into how women's writing is an assertion of female identity and acts as a subjective agency over the conventional social system.

Keywords: sexuality, masculine language, mirroring, patriarchy, subjectivity.

### INTRODUCTION

American literature aims to explore the relationships and psychological dilemmas of modern man. *The Bell Jar*, an autobiographic novel by Sylvia Plath depicts an American female character's rebellious spirit by fighting against stereotypical roles in a conservative society and breaking the claims of social bondage. The novel is considered as a semi-autobiographical one by Sylvia Plath. She is a recognised literary figure of feminism in American literature. The confessional impulses and the life narratives shared by her created a breakthrough in women's writing. She is best known for her confessional poetry and her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, published shortly before her death by suicide. Plath's own search for identity, assertion of the feminine self, and pressure of choices can be read through her works. Her grave personal discontinuities and insecurities can be seen along with most of her identity as a writer and a poet. The novel was published in 1963. It accounts her own life experiences, as a student and her suicidal triggers.

*The Bell Jar* is a symbol that readers of twentieth-century literature are all too familiar with. The novel attempts to investigate interpersonal interactions and the psychological conundrums of the protagonist, Esther Greenwood. She has created a "bell jar" in her head. The bell jar is an isolated object, which is easy enough to describe as a claustrophobic, rigid, and unbreakable shell, a captive trapped in the glass walls, even though its symbolic meaning is a little more ambiguous and obscure. The novel elaborates on what social pressures

led to the formation of such a psychological space. It has affected the protagonist's presence in society and contributed to the fragmentation of her soul. Esther Greenwood is one of the most distinctive characters in mid-twentieth American fiction. Esther is the reflection of the character of Plath. Stereotypical gender roles and the subjugation of women are clear themes in society's boundaries of *The Bell Jar*. In this novel, we see the role of women as a second gender. It is written in a series of flashbacks, showing some of Esther's past.

### CLOSE STUDY OF "THE BELL JAR"

Sylvia Plath's semi-autobiographical book *The Bell Jar* explores the politics of sexism against women, the mind-body link (or disconnection), the pressure to choose between gender binary options and otherness. Plath has highly interwoven the intricacies of the female body and mental health. It is a recollection of Esther Greenwood's mental breakdowns, her bodily experiences, the re-ordering of conventionality, and the concept of mirroring her individual choices about life, sexual desires, and her identity as a woman. Plath through this semi-autobiographical novel implies the transition of Esther Greenwood's shift from the male agenda about life to more of a possible female autonomy over life, body, and mental health. The setting of Esther's character is an attempt at shattering the preconstructed societal obsession with the 'feminine identity.' Plath rejects the marriage-centric and child-rearing nature of women, which was one of the highly accepted notions about women in the 1960s. The story opens in New York during a weird and steamy summer after Esther won a magazine contest by producing an essay, a poem, and other creative works. Esther meets two other interns who disagree with her views on femininity and her inner conflicts. They were the rebellious and sexual Doreen and the sensible and virgin Betsy. During this moment, Esther considers her relationship with Buddy Willard and how upset she was when he revealed he was not her virgin and claimed he had been duped. She regards him as a hypocrite because he pretended to be more experienced. Esther spent the remainder of her summer at her and was compelled to stay at home with his mother after being rejected from a writing school. Esther's father died while she was a child. She begins writing a novel, but as her despair develops, she makes repeated inept attempts to terminate her life. Eventually, she survives a sleeping pill overdose. Esther was admitted to a mental institution, where she was cared for by a progressive psychiatrist, who eased her anxiety about premarital sex and encouraged her to have a diaphragm. In addition, Esther was treated with an electric shock, which made her feel like she had been released from a bell jar. Esther lost her virginity over a night, which she saw as a millstone. She asked another patient, Joan, for assistance when she began bleeding, and Joan went to the emergency department with her. Soon after, Joan killed herself, and her passing appeared to stop Esther from having suicidal thoughts. The book concludes with Esther, who appears to have been reborn, deciding whether to appear before the test board. *The Bell Jar*, once hailed for its caustic self-mockery and uncompromising honesty, is today regarded as a harsh indictment of 1950s socio-politics. Plath draws a striking parallel between Esther's growing knowledge of women's constrained duties and his developing isolation and anxiety. Esther's sense of fractured self is tied to the competing demands put on women regarding sexuality, parenting, and intellectual performance. Her future recovery depends on whether she can reject the dominant stereotypes of femininity in fiction. *The Bell Jar* does not confine itself to the examination of gender despite its preoccupation with America's ugly 1950s atmosphere.

### ECRITURE FEMININE AND WOMEN WRITING

Writing about women's lives can be seen as a remedy for stifling their experiences and voices throughout history and literature for centuries. To understand the writing style of women's life, within the corpus of a theoretical framework, "women's literature" has great meaning. It is a term of feminist thought, coined by Helen Cixous in her essay 'The Laughter of Medusa', published in 1976. Cixous asserts the importance of women writing to themselves in the essay:

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Women must put herself into the text—as into the world and history—by her movement. (Cixous 1976, 875).

Cixous aims to create a genre of women's literature that is different from traditional male-dominated literature and women's experiences written by men. The call for women to write about their life and body is a break from the repressions and differences she has faced in their life and their narratives. 'Ecriture feminine' foregrounds the importance of a psychic understanding of the feminine self, together with the body. The inscription of female experiences, sexually, mentally, or physically expounds how women who are positioned as 'other' in the societal structure can reaffirm their understanding of self, and claim their body through writing. American feminist critic and writer Elaine Showalter defines 'Ecriture feminine' as 'the inscription of female body and feminine difference in language and text' (Showalter 1986, 249). Giving prominence to the female experience and inventing a language, other than the standard one which is inherently masculine is a way to evade the male monopoly, highly visible in literature all over the world.

Language can never be considered a neutral medium because it is controlled by phallic-centered ideology and Cixous mentioned *Ecriture Feminine* as the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system. Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory; Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* wrote, 'the female writer is seen as suffering the handicap of using the language, which is essentially a male instrument fashioned for male purposes' (Barry 2010, 126). Writing about the feminine self and body, in the work, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath undermines the phallic superiority and celebrates femininity as it is. The assertion of the feminine self, in the work, which is from the genre is a retrieval from the male desires and celebrates women's autonomy over their body as well as the self/other dualism. The articulation of the female body, sexuality, and liberation from the objectification of male desires can be analyzed from the selected readings.

## METAPHORICAL REPRESENTATION OF FEMININE WRITING

In the novel, Esther dematerializes her own body. She compares it to a hole – a physical absence. Esther Greenwood can be seen as a metaphor for the experience of many women in the 1950s and 1960s who were struggling to find their place in a society that had limited options for them. Esther's issues with melancholy, anxiety, and identity might be understood as a microcosm of the cultural constraints and expectations that women experienced during the period. The bell jar itself can be seen as a metaphor for the societal constraints that were trapping women like Esther. The bell jar represents the suffocating feeling of being trapped and unable to escape the expectations and limitations that society had placed upon women. Esther's journey throughout the novel can be seen as a metaphor for the larger feminist movement of the time, as she seeks to break free from the confines of the bell jar and find her path in life. Her struggles to assert her independence, express her sexuality, and pursue her dreams can be seen as symbolic of the larger struggles that women faced in achieving equality and freedom in a patriarchal society.

Esther's body is represented through three different phases in *The Bell Jar*, neither of them implies a unified/coherent image of the body but implies a constantly changing female body, which is constructed through various discourses and metaphors. In the beginning phase, Esther's body is 'written' through various expectations and influenced by the fashion of New York City, followed by the disembodiment of her body due to the alienation from herself and her body image. Finally, during the third phase, Plath presents Esther with an 'embodied self' and body, which reverts to normal. The role her 'madness' plays in her body, is a cultural inscription of 'body'. Esther wants to be a writer, at the initial stages of the novel but deviates from that after her mental breakdown. Her indecision and alienation from the established outlook of society's achievements can be considered as a breakaway from the desired outcomes of a woman. Her choices can be interpreted clearly at stake and confused. The metaphorical representation of the 'fig tree' in the novel is Esther's life choices, which she finds impossible to reconcile and compromise to choose between anyone. The pressure of choice, led to Esther's psychic collapse, and disembodiment. She rejects the patriarchal idea of a 'happy homemaker' due to the experiences she had with her boyfriend, Buddy Willard. The career potentials, as well as the personal relationships, are compared to the figs. And the way Esther is unable to choose which fig tree she wants reflects her dilemma which is highlighted throughout the novel when it comes to her choices and binaries.

## CONNECTION BETWEEN BODY AND MIND

In her episodes of suicidal attempts, Esther tries three different methods to succeed in it. She tries to strangulate herself, drown, and also uses razors. In the bathroom where she uses a razor to cut herself, she contemplates death and starts realizing that it is the otherness in herself that she wants to get rid of, not herself. Even though Esther's internal dilemmas were catastrophic to a greater extent, she was cautious about harming her body. She exhibits tenderness towards her body and upholds the same emotion throughout her suicidal attempts. Like this, she chooses to drown herself, which may be seen as an escape from the death she chooses for herself because it is a way of dying with which her body would not participate. Her body kept popping back to the surface of the water when she was trying to drown herself, and her 'heartbeat boomed like a dull motor in my ears. I am I am I am' (129). The assertion of her 'self' is written through the repetitive 'I am' which can also be read along with the cadence of her heartbeat. Her consequent psychic breakdowns pulled her to the idea of suicide, which she is not able to perform due to the involuntariness of her body, even when her mind is ready for it. The radical assertion of the 'self' in a traumatic situation is a part of corporeal writing, where the writing is done through her fractured self and the brag of her mind.

*The Bell Jar* portrays Esther's estranged self, which alters at the novel's end when Esther reclaims herself and appears to become linked to her regular self. Esther overcomes her problems between her sexuality and motherhood by acknowledging her feelings and acting on them. Being her own woman is a part of reclaiming her individuality from the larger social situation she is in. The freedom of choosing herself over others is also the freedom from 'the repression of the culture' (Cixous 1976, 878). She also overcomes the marriage issue by realizing that she does not want to wed someone like Buddy at all. She also dismisses several female experiences as sick or considers them way too normal. This includes Esther's initial reaction to childbirth as 'sick' and 'insecure'. Plath presents the novel as a liberating experience, of Esther from her encapsulation of alienation.

## RETREAT FROM MASCULINE LANGUAGE

*The Bell Jar* follows Esther's journey – from inside the jar to the outside world. His inability to choose, to decide with responsibility and a tendency to - all of these were a reaction to the rigidly conservative era of the 1950s. Plath integrates fractures of Esther's inner self and false self, through a language that subverts from the masculine language. As Cixous wrote, 'It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded-which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. Plath attempts to construct her novel through female experiences and themes. She retreats from the traditional female writing and reflects on the desire for asserting the self, and re-establishes the relationship between mind/body dualism. Esther's retreat from the male language can be seen from her early college days, where she identifies physics/chemistry as two strong male subjects taught in college by a male professor. His textbook is written to teach college girls, and if it worked on them, he was going to get it published. Plath wrote about the authority he has over college girls. He articulated and shrank everything into letters and numbers, and abbreviated, restricted, and reduced the universe into physical principles (29). The structured form of physics and chemistry and their definite symbols were considered phallic by Esther, due to their definite and authoritarian power over the other subjects. Her intolerance to this is asserted when she wrote, 'The day I went to physics class it was death' (36). Whereas Esther connects herself, with the Biology classes and forms an interconnection with the subject.

The parallel connection with the biological aspects is also later derived when Esther's body is compared with biological figures, which include 'leaves', that are archetypically feminine. Plath wrote 'for a while, I toyed with the idea of being a botanist and studying the wild grasses in Africa or the South American rainforests' (35). The tension between what Esther considered as life-sustaining and the distinctive subjects is conveyed through her interests in both subjects. The 'escaping' or retreat from the male-centered language too, feminine can be associated with the part of subversion Plath adopted from conventionality. The association of Esther with her doctors can be analyzed, through the way they made her regain her inner self through communication. Plath rejects the male language and asserts the female identity to thrive in the outer world, through the expression of the feminine self.

## CONCLUSION

An analysis of *The Bell Jar* through the lens of female writing, with different sub-phases including the duality of body and mind, differentiation, and metaphorical representation of Esther's life, leads to a psychological and sociological exploration of the interconnected woman. He tries to mend the rifts between his inner self and the outside world. Plath wrote her novel through various images of the female experience and broke with traditional images of "women" and "madness". Esther's self-destructive reactions to the outside world eventually translate into a self-protective situation where she returns to her normal life and resists the pressures of others and her other self. The retreat from the clitoris-centered language and conventionality of character creation is a re-examination of female writing.

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