

The Bell Jar: An Inextricable Hysteria of a Woman Consequent of a Distorted Identity

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The portrayal of women as 'Deviant' has an elongated history. Even the world's foremost religions and traditions dealing with spirituality often projected women as "uncontrollable." In literature woman suffering from hysteria have been an engrossing subject. Hysteria as a female condition refers to emotional excess such as fear or panic. The term comes from the Greek word 'hysterikos', which means "of the womb." It was originally seen as a neurotic condition associated with women.

Sylvia Plath is one amongst those women who lived the histrionic life. Mary Kinzie takes stock of the disordered and perplexed state of Plath criticism in these words:

Repetitive is the best way to characteristic the ensuing criticism of her work. Whether they are pedantic, musing, miffed, or so obviously confused that they can't find cover, most reviews become 'adjective' to a fault. The following terms appear with an alarming, juggernaut regularity whether in praise or blame: Anguished, arch, afflicted, boiling, biting, bitter, crippling, confessional, coy, crumbling, demonic, disturbed, dangerous, dark, delirious, enigmatic, fierce, feverish, frightening, ghastly, horrible, horrifying, hysterical, hair-raising, incredible, intolerable, insufferable, intense, murderous, nightmarish, negative, nay-saying, obsessed, outrageous, ominous, ruthless, sick, self-pitying, self-referring, solipsistic, shocking, scalding, suicidal, terrifying, terrible, throbbing, twisted, tragic, violent. (289)

Sylvia Plath was more raw and more refine, more self-negative and more productive, a lot insane and a lot sane as compared to an average human being. *The Bell Jar*, a semi-autobiographical novel is an unwavering source on the subject of a woman's suicide in a society dominated by a male. The novel is the outcome of Plath's experience of mental illness, which ultimately led to her committing suicide in 1963. It got published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. According to Elaine Showalter,

women epitomize the main clientele for nervous breakdown. Various literary theorists have endeavored to explore specific designs in the antifeminist attitude of diverse nations. Elaine Showalter through her essay, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" has located three routine method of feminist literary theory, and arranged them according to various national groups. She commented:

English Feminist Criticism, essentially Marxist, stresses oppression; French Feminist Criticism, essentially psychoanalytic, stresses repression; American Feminist Criticism, essentially textual, stresses expression. All, however, has become gynocentric. All are struggling to find a terminology that can rescue the feminine from its stereotypical associations with inferiority. (12)

The Bell Jar became a literary classic, which was an attempt to analyze biographical details about the novelist's life. Jo Gill stated that *The Bell Jar* is often interpreted:

With a view to the insights it might offer into the working processes of the poet, and as though this were the real, authentic voice of the now-dead author communicating from beyond the grave. (74)

The chief protagonist Esther like the novelist eventually comes to a realization that there is modicum room for her to flourish and assess her true self. This can be evaluated at the commencement of the narrative where Esther confesses that; 'I knew there was something wrong with me that summer' (1). In 1963, Betty Friedan, one of the greatest feminist idol maintained in her book; 'that women cannot explain the reason for their disappointment; they just know that something is wrong. She regrets that many girls drop out of college to get married and start a family' (12). She expresses, the rush for starting a family badly harms women's hopes. The very thought of marriage, makes Esther disclose that:

[I]t would mean getting up at seven and cooking eggs and bacon and toast and coffee...and then when he came home after a lively, fascinating day he'd expect a big dinner, and I'd spend the evening washing up even more dirty plates till I fell into bed, utterly exhausted. (68)

Being a student at prominent Smith College, Esther aspires to become a writer, but soon after coming back to her mother, she finds herself in a grave depression. She goes through a nervous breakdown. Her challenging life in a big city like New York along with her mental illness makes her relationship with a medical student Buddy Willard turbulent. Furthermore, her condition worsens after receiving a rejection letter from Harvard. Despite, treatment she doesn't show much of improvement. During

this time she tries to end her life with sleeping pills. However, after several sessions of treatment she finally recovers and ultimately manages to get back to school. In spite of her recovery, Esther still feels a lot of pressure from not only the society but from her fiancé also. In a social structure where women's expectations and desires are not respected there 'madness and confinement were both an expression of female powerlessness and an unsuccessful attempt to reject and overcome this state' (79).

Esther further construes woman as an object of desire and a machine for reproduction. In the scene where she accompanies her future husband Buddy Willard to a delivery room, she sees the woman as tied to a 'torture table' (53) and that her 'stomach stuck up so high I couldn't see her face or the upper part of her body at all' (53). She further adds:

I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister knowing way, that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems anymore. So I began to think maybe it was true than 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. (69)

The childbirth metaphor explains not only a woman's quandary but also her thoughts about motherhood. Esther has the opinion that pregnancy and childbirth for men have become a means to coerce and subjugate the woman. When she is hospitalized on account of her mental breakdown she ponders an expecting woman is vulnerable to mental breakdown, not because of the agonizing pain but because of a loss of identity. She even goes to extent of comparing her life with a fig tree. This metaphor brings out her hidden fear to surface. She asserts:

I saw my life branching out before me like green fig tree....from the tip of every branch...a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, another fig was a brilliant professor,...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. (62-63)

The novel is supplied with instances where Esther is seen juggling between repudiating the social norms altogether and undertaking them acquiescently. According to Friedan, there are a section of young girls in every society 'whose greatest ambition has been marriage and children' (22). Esther considered marriages as a type of bondage and 'the trouble was, I hated the idea of serving man' (83). For

her the years spent with her father were 'the years of neglect' (186). She even disapproves Mrs. Willard, she thinking that to, 'cook and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard's mother did from morning till night, she was the wife of a university professor and had been a private school teacher herself' (68-69). On the contrary, she admires her boss, Jay Cee's fortitude and contemplates that 'I wish I had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I'd know what to do. My own mother wasn't much help' (32). Esther is often compared with Holden Caulfield, the hero of J. D. Salinger's 1951 novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. Both the protagonists face serious identity crisis. According to Laing, the loss of identity plays a pivotal part in the psychotic development of a person. He notes the loss of identity is the outcome of the real self's departure from the world that causes the inner-self to 'develop an overall sense of impoverishment, which is expressed in complaints of emptiness, deadness,...desolation, worthlessness of the inner life' (96). As a consequence, Esther stops eating, sleeping, and for three weeks, she neither washes her clothes nor her hair. To her 'it seemed silly to wash one day when I would only have to wash again the next. It made me tired just to think of it' (123).

In *The Bell Jar*, the image of the zombie refers to an imperative metaphor for the shattered self and the bereavement of a coherent identity, which is shown when Esther, who after returning home from New York, makes a phone call: 'I dialed the admission office and listened to the zombie voice leave a message that Miss Esther Greenwood was cancelling all arrangements to come to summer school' (115). Subsequently in the novel, she discloses to a psychiatrist that, 'I tried to speak in a cool, calm way, but the zombie rose up in my throat and chocked me off' (121).

The component of alienated self is also evident in Plath's employment of mirror and photographs. On her way back to her room in the hotel she encounters a reflection of herself in the mirror of an elevator: 'then my ears went funny, and I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used up I looked' (16). Later on, she senses the image of her 'face in the mirror look like a sick Indian' (108). By comparing herself to a 'smudgy-eyed Chinese woman' or 'sick Indian' the protagonist lays emphasis on her distance from a genuine self, which becomes a complete stranger to her. Plath uses the idea of photographs as a way to highlight the false self. Towards the culmination of her internship at Ladies' Day, her photograph is required for the magazine that she declines. She does not want to be clicked as she

feels that she will break into tears. Before the photographer can take her picture, the 'salt tears and miserable noises that had been prowling around in burst out into the room' (98). At this point in the novel, Esther's misery and depressed side comes to light. She even relates the camera with an 'animal' (98).

The metaphor of the bell jar is viewed as a vacuum, which has engulfed Esther. She says that:

If Mrs. Guinea had given me a ticket to Europe, or a round-the-world cruise, it wouldn't have made one scrap of a difference to me, because wherever I sat-on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok- I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air. (178)

According, to numerous female writers, patriarchy has a big role to play in making a woman suffer from mental illness. Hence, hysteria and madness is seen as a way for giving vent to women's pains from women writers' perspective. *The Bell Jar* brings out the turmoil of a young woman who is torn between her literary ambitions and social scenarios. In order to safeguard female sovereignty and awareness Showalter asserts that '...the women's novel has always had to struggle against the women's experience to the second rank' (36).

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