

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*: A Feministic Reading

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Abstract

At the time when Sylvia Plath was at her most productive artistically, sea changes were underway in America and the entire western world. Following the changed socio-economic dispensation in the aftermath of the intense activity of the Second World War, there was a revival in women's demands for a better social status and this came to be known as the Second Feministic Movement. As a symptom and result of this, women's authorship flowered and struggled at the same time, the aim being to present the world view of women for women, a departure from the so-far prevailing world view of men for women. However, to limit the former as 'feministic' would perhaps not be a just act. This study, accordingly, undertakes deep textual and sub-textual analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, long seen as a feminist writer's artistic expression, to establish how far the feministic thought is intertwined in the narrative.

Keywords: feministic reading, Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar

1. Introduction

The Bell Jar is Sylvia Plath's only novel, and this fact perhaps also accounts for the author's inner voice which is perceptibly audible in the narratology. Plath flamboyantly pens the dark side or paradoxes of her life in this novel written in a semi-autobiographical genre taking a tone that is brutally confessional, and mirthlessly honest (Das, 2014). As an author, Plath had to publish *The Bell Jar* under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas though it did get some positive reviews (Wagner-Martin, 2013).

As it is understood in our times, the commonalities between Plath's life and that of her protagonist Esther in the novel are neither coincidental nor much apart (Carter, 2021). Like the author, Esther depends on a full scholarship to attend the same college as Plath, Smith College, and excels at academics, even turning out early to be a published poet. That Plath did not intend to conceal the autobiographical similitude is established as the author's acute mental trauma finds itself manifested in Esther who is institutionalized following mental collapse and later, released to an uncertain future.

"A feeling of tenderness filled my heart. My heroine would be myself, only in disguise. She would be called Elaine. Elaine. I counted the letters on my fingers. There were six letters in Esther, too. It seemed a lucky thing." (Plath, 1972, p. 120).

Whether by design or coincidence, Sylvia also has six letters to it (Plath, 2017). The parallel, however diverges here as Plath electively ends her lives a decade later, unable to cope with her morbid depression. As an author, Plath compresses all the travails of her protagonist's life in a short duration of six months, indicating that even a period as limited as that can be full of vicissitudes adequate to inundate an entire life as that of herself. Survival for an exceptional person, an overachiever, in a heavily patriarchal society with few or no feminine role models in the profession that Esther wants to choose (Archambault, 2011), (she wants to be a writer) is doubtful, this doubt is manifested in the gender-class prejudices that she encounters. Esther, though a bright student, has to contend with her peers who come from wealthy families with great financial resources to fund their wards' education while she lives a complicated life with few choices, some of which are suggested by her mother: Take a course in shorthand and be happy to land a menial job in some bleak office, or marry and live to provide for a husband.

"The only thing was, when I tried to picture myself in some job, briskly jotting down line after line of shorthand, my mind went blank. There wasn't one job I felt like doing where you used shorthand. And, as I sat there and watched, the white chalk curlicues blurred into senselessness." (Plath, 1972, p. 122).

The choices of "themselves" are a reflection of the lack of possibilities for women in the land of opportunities. The young, educated women of the 1950s' America had limitations imposed on them, and perchance they chose a career that is a male domain (Schrepfer, 2005), they came up against an impenetrable wall. After the end of the Second World War which necessitated women's economic participation for obvious reasons, their gradual return to domestic tasks. This came about as women who had replaced men in the workplace as the latter were engaged in the forces, were now fired from their positions and the men reinstated. In a way, this acted as a catalyst to the Second Feminism Movement because now women had experienced a life other than what society idealized for them so far. Job options for them were very limited, mainly to the nursing or teaching fields, apart from the secretarial domain which was almost exclusively a feminine one so far (Higginbotham, 1994). Issues from domestic violence to workplace discrimination suddenly became

central and there was collective surge to annihilate the inferior image of women. Women of the America of the 1950s and 60s were wary of returning to their old place in the social system, a system which was becoming increasingly unacceptable to them (Lopata, 2017).

The act of attempting to kill herself is an attempt to escape a future that Esther can already visualize, and it is one that she does not like. The story in *The Bell Jar* moves on many literary planes and feministic distress is the most obvious (Coslett et al., 2000). However, Plath decides to keep Esther alive looks forward to the change in the surroundings which even she could not ignore notwithstanding her own hopelessness, depression, and eventual suicide. After an initial setback of publication under an adopted name, soon after her death in 1963, the novel was published under Plath's real name in England, and in the USA in early 1970s. Remarkably, the work was well received by the readers, both men and women.

2. Literature Review

Gnanamuttu et al. (2022) pointed to the use of hypodiegesis by Plath as a device to take the reader into the past amongst other narrative techniques to highlight the shuttling of Esther between the past and the present, apparently drawing a parallel to the American women torn between the promises of the second wave of feminism of dreams getting fulfilled against the patriarchal, old selves. In a comparative study, Roy (2020) draws attention to issues of mental health that were central to the United States in 1950s- 1960s. Depression though was considered a not-so-common ailment in an age of unpredictability. Bonasera (2019) similarly focuses on Plath's use of heterotopic and liminal spaces in *The Bell Jar* as reconstructions of the female identity. The author effectively uses the in-between spaces and objects that transform or cast one's image to reconstruct female identity. This is a reaction to the closed spaces that enclose and limit women, and instead giving women unlimited spatial dimensions that, for the author, is the space for creative expression. Jernigan's textual analysis also focuses on the idea of reconfiguration, only that it concerns the world more than the female identity. He opines that Esther's aversion to "women's work" is symbolic of the gendered segmentation and segregation that occupations at the time offered to the 'pink collar workforce'. It also symbolizes the vast gap between 'writing' and 'typewriting', the former being the ambition of many women of Plath's time while the latter was the societal role imposed on them.

Farid and Yuliati (2019) trace the course of Esther's life as a journey in 'self-actualization' by applying Maslow's Needs Theory and the New Criticism Theory. Ghandeharion et al. (2016) rightly calls *The Bell Jar* 'a mirror of American fifties' in tracing the history of disillusionment and identity crisis in the life of Esther Greenwood. The authors hold that in the life of Esther, Plath finds a reconciliation between the liberated and the subordinated woman as Esther's destiny shows her being a career as well as a family woman. Boyles (2015) adds a new angle to the expression of feminism in *The Bell Jar* when she analyzes the role of humor as the tool that Plath employs to challenge the rut of patriarchy in general and to critique gender inequality, in particular. So far, Plath's humor has at best been ignored or seen as a factor of her depression and not as a constructive device. Boyles opines that in addition to this, humor in the novel serves to subvert 'dominant modes of power and authority' which is another form of feministic expression. Esther's sartorial dissatisfaction, according to Pelt (2015) also echoes her identity search: Frequently, she rues her unhappiness with her clothing but is uncertain what it is about them that lies at the helm. The pressure of choice between the binaries of freedom for self-expression and socio-biological demands on women that Plath faced in real life and created for Esther in *The Bell Jar*, are the impossible to reconcile according to Séllei (2003), allegorised in the fig tree. Esther sees the two possibilities as the branches of the tree that she can cling to: One is the domesticity that a husband and children offered, the other is the life of a poet and writer, each choice being equally difficult to make (for the American women of the time) while the pressure of making a choice drives her to the brink.

In a comparative study, Sakane (1998) avers that the process of construction of identity for women must begin with deconstruction of the concepts that define womanhood that are internal to them and given to them by the society. This, perhaps, accounts for the element of breakdown in Esther for whom the act of (attempted) suicide is like an act of purging herself of all that she despises about her earlier identity. Women's alienation from language and the concomitant need to find one for feminine expression are highlighted by Budick (1987), and that Plath chooses to write in a feminine language. The study sees male domination as also being in control of language, suffocating women's expression, and hence, the need for a new language. Finally, the study claims that the pattern of retreat in the narrative is symptomatic of both retreat and the opposite of it. Pascual-Garrido (2017), however, sees *The Bell Jar*, not as a feminist discourse but as an epitome of the universal plight of the species as human strive to attain fulfil the two myths of community and self-actualization. She states that breakdown is a result of the shattering of these unattainable myths.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a historical-textual analysis strategy to examine expressions of feminism in the text, subtext, symbols, and values in the text in the light of the contemporary feministic movement. The Second Feministic Movement coincided with the time when Plath was in her most prolific form, especially when *The Bell Jar* was first published, to begin with to positive reviews though it was brought out under a pseudonym. Subsequent publications, however, received warmer critical acclaim but by then Plath was no more. Any form of art is wont to reflect contemporary social life though this similarity between fact and fiction may be covert at times. This study unearths both textual and sub-textual connections between the life of the protagonist, Esther and the America of 1950s-60s and establishes the influence of the feministic thought on the development of her character.

4. Results

Feministic reading of the text

At its core, *The Bell Jar* concerns the search of a young American woman in the 1950s for her social and artistic identity. Nearing the end of her adolescence and college life, Esther's crisis is her inability to feel part of the community in which she finds herself, a complete separateness from the people around her. The dilemmas that she fights are not only personal but also, societal as she aspires to be a writer in a society that has little respect for the profession generally, but absolutely none for women in that league. Plath, thus, draws parallels with great writers such as Joyce and Lawrence in portraying fractured identities and yearning for new ones.

This was also a period when the social handicap of women, especially the intellectually gifted ones was coming to the fore as early life angst hit them hard. Esther is typically an epitome of such an individual caught as she is representative of American women in a fast-transitioning society which is nevertheless insensitive to their search for artistic identity in a prospering economy that did not demand much sweat from its people. In the dearth of adequate models to seek direction from, Esther, the budding American feminine figure, finds herself at bay with the inner forces to guide her more than any outer manifestation of life.

"Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolleybus. I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn't get myself to react. I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo." (Leonard, 1982, p. 65).

Yet, what causes distress to Esther is not so much her individual search as it is the realization that the other women are so well-adjusted to their 'boring' lives.

"These girls looked awfully bored to me. I saw them on the sunroof, yawning and painting their nails and trying to keep up their Bermuda tans, and they seemed bored as hell. I talked with one of them, and she was bored with yachts and bored with flying around in airplanes and bored with skiing in Switzerland at Christmas and bored with men in Brazil." (Webber & Grumman, 1978, p. 141)

Or later. So close to her breakdown, Esther procrastinates washing herself or her hair because that would not be the end of it, she would need to do those things again the next day and the day next to that and so on.

"I saw the days of the year stretching ahead like a series of bright, white boxes, and separating one box from another was sleep, like a black shade. Only for me, the long perspective of shades that set off one box from the next had suddenly snapped up, and I could see day after day after day glaring ahead of me like a white, broad, infinitely desolate avenue." (Plath, 1972, p. 129).

It infuriates Esther that she shares workspace with these women with whom she cannot feel any connect, forcing her deeper into the abyss of isolation as she does not so much as want to disclose her real name and prefers to go incognito in her excursions to Lenny's where she adopts the pseudonym of Elly Higginbottom. Esther's sociopathic tendency is also visible in her absence from social events that she is supposed to attend, metaphorically and otherwise too, not taking well to the food served at the banquet organized by *Ladies' Day* just as she failed to take to her co-workers. Femininity and her hunger for its expression reach a pinnacle in the utter humiliation of the male organ as she pictures Buddy's penis as "turkey neck" and "turkey gizzards", a rejection of Buddy for his lack of virginity (a quality desirable in women), the acts showing the contemporary American woman's yearning for equality with the male gender, not granted by the society. With this Esther also rejects the hypocritical American male parodied in Buddy as she;

"Snatched up a pencil and crossed out Buddy's message. Then I turned the letter paper over and on the opposite side wrote that I was engaged to a simultaneous interpreter and never wanted to see Buddy again as I did not want to give my children a hypocrite for a father." (Plath, 1972, p. 1)

All too clearly, feminist thought is visible in Esther's brave gesture as in one stroke, she decides the future for herself and her yet-to-be-born child. At the same time, with undercurrents of feminist demands in the America of Plath's time, the process of 'growing up' of a society are mirrored in the *bildungsroman* or growth of the narrative. However, the author discards the traditional narrative methods such as a firm plot or narratology in favor of a mounting elaboration of the protagonist's deeply unstable psychological state, converting the voices of dissatisfaction with her lot that constantly rancor in her mind into a punctured narrative which easily allows the reader to peep into her mind. This also allows the reader to see her distorted vision of the world through her associations with those around her. Esther voices her ironical appraisal of the people and events that she perceives, adopts a chronically mocking (and at times, self-mocking) tone, cutting through the hypocrisy and shallowness of those around her. At times, Esther almost touches black comedy in her humor, ultimately a macabre perception of the ugly, painful, unfair reality around her.

"I knew I might have a baby, but that thought hung far and dim in the distance and didn't trouble me at all. There was no one hundred per cent sure way not to have a baby, it said in an article my mother cut out of the Reader's Digest and mailed to me at college. This article was written by a married woman." (Plath, 1972, p. 25).

Though the narrative adopts the stream of consciousness which so characterises other fragmented (male) characters before her such as Joyce and Gabler (2013) in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Esther is, in addition, a female struggling to achieve the 'American Girlhood' in the midst of her sexual crisis. The "double standards that she sees around her trouble her far more than her particularly difficult choice between an artistic career and marriage and motherhood. These dual social norms are intolerable to her. A woman lawyer, a career woman like herself, appals her as she reads through the cutting that her mother sent her in college, ironically titled "*In Defense of Chastity*":

"It gave all the reasons a girl shouldn't sleep with anybody but her husband and then only after they were married. The main point of the

article was that a man's world is different from a woman's world and a man's emotions are different from a woman's emotions and only marriage can bring the two worlds and the two different sets of emotions together properly. My mother said this was something a girl didn't know about till it was too late, so she had to take the advice of people who were already experts, like a married woman." (Plath, 1972, p. 25).

Feminism in the America of 1950s was a movement divided against itself as pseudo-feminists became the torch bearers of the men's patriarchal demands on women, indeed establishing the superiority (and hence desirability) of a world that conformed to the male standards.

"This woman lawyer said the best men wanted to be pure for their wives, and even if they weren't pure, they wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex. Of course they would try to persuade a girl to have sex and say they would marry her later, but as soon as she gave in, they would lose all respect for her and start saying that if she did that with them she would do that with other men and they would end up by making her life miserable. The woman finished her article by saying better be safe than sorry and besides, there was no sure way of not getting stuck with a baby and then you'd really be in a pickle. . (Plath, 1972, p. 25).

As an artist and as a woman in a suffocating world of double standards, Plath's peculiar pain was one of self-expression, or rather, the lack of opportunities for it. At a human level, she was troubled by the fact that the pursuit of chastity in women sadly ignored the reality of their being as human as men, having feelings just like them.

Now the one thing this article didn't seem to me to consider was how a girl felt." (Teitz, 1972, p. 21).

Moreover, she directly hints at equality for the genders when Esther unabashedly says that if a woman (read Esther) were to stick to the path of chastity but discover that her man was not as chaste as her, then, like her male counterparts, she should have the right of taking her revenge by making his life as miserable as society (apparently) allowed a man to make a woman's life if she were to be discovered to be not chaste in marriage.

"It might be nice to be pure and then to marry a pure man, but what if he suddenly confessed he wasn't pure after we were married, the way Buddy Willard had? 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.. Finally I decided that if it was so difficult to find a red-blooded intelligent man who was still pure by the time he was twenty-one I might as well forget about staying pure myself and marry somebody who wasn't pure either. Then when he started to make my life miserable I could make his miserable as well." (Llanas, 2012, p. 43).

Esther, echoing the contemporary feministic hysteria bitterly resents the burden of chastity that is thrust solely upon women while a man was at liberty to have a double life. This propels her to the other end of the chastity spectrum as she becomes obsessed with sexuality, eager to reject the "pureness" standards that others, including 'free women' in her world admire. She has early sexual encounters, experimenting with foreigners Marco and Constantin, later with her compatriot Irwin, every time withdrawing with a sense of unfulfillment. Even her relationship with Buddy ends in the realization that he is a hypocrite and she could not bear the fact that the child from her (suspected) pregnancy will have such a father. On the whole, she sees what others do not,

"When I was nineteen, pureness was the great issue. Instead of the world being divided up into Catholics and Protestants or Republicans and Democrats or white men and black men or even men and women, I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn't, and this seemed the only really significant difference between one person and another." (Gentry, 2006, p. 70).

Apparently, it is not the fact of being or not being chaste that troubles her. In any case, her desires are intellectual and not sensual. This becomes apparent from another of the feministic themes that she lives through: Her suggestively homosexual relationship with Joan. During the second wave of feminism which coincided with Plath's years as an author, 'separatist feminists' included many homosexual women who advocated that women's liberation was possible only by breaking away from men.

Utter predictability to the lack of adventure or novelty totally repelled Esther: Coincidentally, these were also what characterized the woman's world of the time. The popular American culture of Plath's time was steeped in an idealized tranquil suburban life from which the second wave of feminism advocated an abrupt break. It provoked intense debate about the roots of women's oppression, the nature of gender, and family as an instrument of it. Any. Hint at security is a cause for despise in Esther wise as she appears in the knowledge that men have a utilitarian view of women as objects that were fitted by nature to fulfil only certain tasks see women only as

"That's one of the reasons I never wanted to get married. The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket. And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat." (Aryan, 2020, p. 92).

The motif of motherhood is another of the feministic core issues with women's rights lying at the fulcrum. The critical role of mothers that went unrecognized as being of any value till the start of the early feministic movements in 1840s led to the forming of a complicated relationship between feminism and motherhood. Some feminists, typically of white descent, in fact, went so far as to state starkly that the yoke of reproduction that the women were forced to carry ensured that they were never freed from the bonds of patriarchy. Herein women of colored descent differed as they saw motherhood as not only freedom but also, agency. Esther, the aspiring career woman of the land of opportunities, definitely identifies with her white sisters as she concedes to Doctor Nolan her sense of burden at the prospect of an imminent

pregnancy. Here Esther is the spokesperson for sexual equality.

"What I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb," I had told Doctor Nolan. "A man doesn't have a worry in the world, while I've got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line." "Yes," I said, "but. . ." and I told Doctor Nolan about the married woman lawyer and her *Defense of Chastity*. Doctor Nolan waited until I was finished. Then she burst out laughing. "Propaganda!" she said, and scribbled the name and address of this doctor on a prescription pad." (Matuz, 1991, p. 409).

Carrying the motif forward, references to babies appear throughout the novel in various forms (in more than twenty places): There were *Big glass bottles full of babies that had died before they were born* in Buddy's medical college, the starfish that Esther cut out for *the baby* to play with, *pickled babies* in laboratory jars, and so on. Apart from hinting at the life-and-death theme of the novel, this reflects Esther's ongoing confusion with motherhood as well as Plath, the feminist's own anguish in her poems, emblematic of women's anguish, the predicament of women in the 1950s-60s when the second wave of feminism hit the western world and women's reproductive rights were a matter of state laws.

Shedding the limited identity that the society so far allowed women, as wife or mother, Esther takes one bold step in her plans to flee to another city where she might be able to break free of her 'given' self, which, curiously also includes her name, and start anew. This is her quest to recreate herself anew after eliminating the prescriptive identity that clings to her. However, that she wants to flee to another American city (and not another continent) vouches for her limited imagination and sense of enterprise: Ostensibly, results of the patriarchal system around her.

"I thought if I ever did get to Chicago, I might change my name to Elly Higginbottom for good. Then nobody would know I had thrown up a scholarship at a big eastern women's college and mucked up a month in New York and refused a perfectly solid medical student for a husband who would one day be a member of the AMA and earn pots of money. In Chicago, people would take me for what I was." (Hawthorn, 1983, p. 120).

5. Conclusion

The 1950s-1960s were happening times in America and most of the western world. These were decades that already had a college-educated child-bearing female population discontented with their lives, impelling their daughters in a new, rebellious direction. This was also a time when America had an almost national pattern of discriminatory conducts and practices against women, some as brash as classified job inserts that advertised segregated jobs for the genders, state laws that controlled reproductive rights of women, and crimes against women remained buried. As her only piece of prose, significantly written towards the closing of her short though prolific life and career, *The Bell Jar* is splattered with innumerable under and overtones of the feministic narrative. This study adopted a historical-textual analysis strategy to critically examines expressions of feminism in the text, subtext, symbols, and values by analyzing them in the light of the contemporary feministic movement. Spurred on by the Civil Rights Movement that spearheaded such high principles as equality and justice, like the earlier movement, this period saw women of all ages and situations participating in debates on gender, equality, and discrimination. Plath, in the meanwhile, saw this as an opportunity to express themselves at the level of both head and heart, and perhaps, change the established epitomes of womanhood and female stereotypes established by men.

Yet Plath's Esther is a complicated protagonist and just as the character in the novel is averse to being compartmentalized, so also it is difficult to label her as a representation of the feminist thought of 1950s-60s. Needless to say, the process of individuation and identity creation involves experimentation with several identities till one or an amalgamation of more than one identities begins to define the individual. In Esther too, as stated earlier, one sees the merging of 'women', one, the mother of a child, and the other, the person, not necessarily the artist or the author. That remains for Esther to discover in due course of time. In other words, it would be a fallacy to see *The Bell Jar* as nothing but a feministic discourse, surely the author that Plath was, her artistic perception could not have been that narrow.

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