



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.2.,2016 (April-June )

ISSN INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

A PSYCHOANALYTICAL STUDY OF SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR*

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ABSTRACT

*The Bell Jar* is a highly autobiographical novel that unveils Plath's seemingly perfect life, underlain by grave personal discontinuities, some of which doubtless had their origin in the death of her father Otto Plath. The novel's protagonist, Esther Greenwood, share many similarities with Plath, including her inability to adapt to New York City, her attempt to commit suicide by taking an excess dose of sleeping pills, her period of recovery involving electroshock and psychotherapy. *The Bell Jar* examines Esther's "quest to forge her own identity, to be herself rather than what others except her to be". Analysed from the psychoanalytical perspective, Esther displays Major Depressive Disorder and Depression. This paper elaborates on the psychological aspects of *The Bell Jar*.

Key Words: Electrocutation, Psychotherapy, Neurosis, Major Depressive Disorder.

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*The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath tells the story of a gifted young woman's mental breakdown beginning during a summer internship as a junior editor at a magazine in New York City in the early 1950s. It was first published in January 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas and later published under her real name. This highly autobiographical novel unveils Plath's seemingly perfect life, underlain by grave personal discontinuities, some of which doubtless had their origin in the death of her father Otto Plath. The novel's protagonist, Esther Greenwood, share many similarities with Plath, including her inability to adapt to New York City, her attempt to commit suicide by taking an excess dose of sleeping pills, her period of recovery involving electroshock and psychotherapy. The real Plath committed suicide in 1963, leaving behind this scathingly sad, honest and perfectly written book, which remains one of the best-told tales of a woman's descent into insanity. The first sentence of *The Bell Jar* alerts the reader to the conflicts that will be dealt with in the novel – "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York". Like Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*, the young college girl Esther is experiencing an adolescent crisis.

*The Bell Jar* examines the question of socially acceptable identity. It examines Esther's "quest to forge her own identity, to be herself rather than what others except her to be". Esther is expected to become a self-

sufficient women and self-sacrificing wife-mother, without any option to attain independence. Esther feels she is a prisoner to domestic duties and fears the loss of her inner self. The novel tells the story of Esther's coming of age, but it does not follow the usual trajectory of adolescent development into adulthood. Instead of undergoing a progressive education in the ways of the world, culminating in an entrance into adulthood, Esther regresses into madness. Experiences intended to be life-changing in a positive sense: Esther's first time in New York City, her first marriage proposal, her success in college, her love flicks – upsets her and disorients her. Instead of finding a new meaning in life, Esther urges to die.

Esther observes a gap between what societies say she should experience and what she does experience. This gap intensifies her madness. Society expects women of Esther's age and station to act cheerful, flexible and confident and Esther feels she must repress her natural gloom, cynicism and dark humour. She feels she cannot discuss or think about the dark spots in life that plague her: personal failure, suffering and death. She knows that the world of fashion she inhabits in New York City should make her feel glamorous and happy, but she finds it filled with poison, drunkenness and violence. Her relationships with men are supposed to be romantic and meaningful, but they are marked by misunderstanding, distrust and brutality. Esther almost continuously feels that her actions are wrong, or that she is the only one to view the world as she does, and eventually she begins to feel a sense of unreality. This sense grows till it becomes unbearable and attempted suicide and madness follow.

The bell jar is an inverted glass jar, generally used to display an object of scientific curiosity, contain a certain kind of inert gas or vacuum. For Esther, bell jar symbolises madness. When gripped by insanity, she feels that she is inside an airless glass jar that distorts her perspective on the world and prevents her from connecting with people around her. At the end of the novel, the bell jar has been lifted, but she can sense that it still hovers over her, waiting to drop at any moment. The bell jar could mean the society's stifling constraints and befuddling mixed messages that trap Esther. The metaphorical denotation of the physical and mental suffocation caused by bell jar is a direct representation of Esther's mental suffocation by the unavoidable settling of depression upon her psyche.

The psychoanalytic principles, propounded by Freud and developed by many of his followers can be used to analyse the issues that the novel problematizes. The basic tenants of psychoanalysis expounds that a person's development is determined by often forgotten events in early childhood rather than inherited traits alone. Human attitude, mannerism, experience and thought are largely influenced by irrational drives that are rooted in the unconscious. This aspect may explain Esther's complex relationship with her father and other men she came across. Esther seems to have an ambivalent attitude towards her father, one that of both hatred and submission. The lack of a father figure during the time of her psychosexual development may have caused her abnormal response to relationships, sexuality etc.

Freud calls the "force by which the sexual instinct is represented in the mind" the *Libido*. This term should be understood broadly, and not as being restricted only to sexual relations, that is, *Libido* refers to various kinds of sexual pleasures and gratifications. According to Freud, all individuals pass through four stages in their development: the oral, the anal, the phallic and the genital. During infancy and childhood, an individual's sexual life is rich but dissociated and unfocussed. Focus occurs at puberty. Esther in *The Bell Jar* displays Oedipus Complex. The Oedipus complex is at the core of neurosis for Freud. According to psychoanalytic theory, every individual passes through a stage in which he/she desires the parent of opposite sex- of course, in an unconscious level. In little boys, this is aided by unconscious fear of castration – castration anxiety- and in little girls it is aided by jealousy of men and what is termed a penis envy.

Esther's relationship with Buddy, a medical student at Yale University, was never satisfactory for Esther. She loathed the fact that being a doctor; she drugged women during pregnancy so that they forget the pain of delivery as they wake up. She was not sexually attracted to him too. The sight of him naked made her think about "turkey neck and turkey gizzards". She says "But undressing in front of Buddy suddenly appealed to me about as much as having my 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”(57).

Buddy’s confession that he had slept with a waitress before, intensified the aversion she had for Buddy. Esther, however, is attracted towards Constantin because she felt that as he held her hands, it was as if she was happier than she was since she was nine and ran on the beach with her father in the summer before his death. Esther realises that she was happy only until the age of nine – before her father’s death. Her affair with Constantin doesn’t consummate as he does not have sex with her, but they hold hands, drink wine and sleep together in a bed.

Esther seems to be perpetually in conflict with the idea of sexuality. She is initially at confusion with the idea of morality and her natural drives. Her false notions of sexuality sprang up mostly from the illogical advices of her mother. As Esther says “My mother had always told me never under any circumstances to go with a man to a man’s room after an evening out, it could mean only one thing. Having sex could mean I might have a baby, not one hundred percent sure, it was said in an article my mother cut out of *Reader’s Digest* and mailed to me at the college” (Plath, 66). As Esther continue to elaborate her thoughts on sexuality,

Instead of the world being divided up into Catholics and Protestants or Republicans and Democrats, or White men or Black men, I saw the world as divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn’t, and this seemed the only significant difference between one person and the other. I thought a spectacular difference would come to me if I crossed the boundary line. (Plath, 67)

She refuses Buddy’s request to get naked in front of him, even though she had no objections in watching him naked. Her obsession with virginity forces her to probe to Buddy’s past and the news of Buddy’s earlier sexual encounters shock Esther and she develops a hatred for him. Esther, however, does not refuse Constantin’s offer to spend a day at his apartment even though she recollects the precautionary advice given to her by her mother and grandmother about what it would mean for a woman to get invited by a single man living in an apartment. Esther even contemplates about having a baby from Constantin. Her id and superego are constantly at struggle in matters of sexual relationships. In her later relationship with Eric, she explains her attitude to sex as improper in love because sex is animalistic.

Esther is constantly attacked by fits of depression or she is a prey to Major Depressive Disorder. It is a mental disorder characterised by a pervasive and persistent low mood that is accompanied by low self-esteem and by loss of interest in normally enjoyable activities. She describes a long list of things that she couldn’t do. Esther considers herself to be a terrible dancer, nor could she sing a song. She had a severe problem with balance, she always fell down as she walked through a narrow board with hands out and books on her head in the gym class. She couldn’t ride a horse or ski, she couldn’t speak German, read Hebrew or write Chinese. The only thing Esther finds herself good at is winning scholarships and prizes, which is in fact more than compensates for the ‘have-nots’ she mentions.

Esther compares her life to a fig tree, where the fig represents different life choices – a husband, children, a poet, professor, an editor, a traveller – she wants all of them, but couldn’t choose, so the figs rot and drop off the tree, uneaten. As the narrative goes:

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 Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and above these figs were many more figs I couldn’t quite make out. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one means losing all the rest. 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. (Plath, 64)

Another major psychic problem that Esther suffers from is neurosis. Neurosis is a class of functional mental disorders involving distress but neither delusions nor hallucinations. Neurosis may also be called as

psychoneurosis or neurotic disorder. It may be caused due to poor ability to adapt to one's environment, an inability to change one's life pattern, and inability to develop a richer, more complex, more satisfying personality. This definition explains Esther's case in particular. Esther displays her first evident signs of neurosis at the country dance club on the last day of her life in New York City. She looks around her to find women in expensive ball clothes and recollects that she could never carry herself in one of them.

Esther's experience with the "women hater" Marco and his violent attack on her at the end of which he smears her face with his blood leaves a deep psychological impact on Esther. On reaching back to her hostel, she climbs up to the roof, perches precariously on its edge and throws her entire wardrobe off the roof, piece by piece. Returning back to the suburbs and to her mother, Esther detects her inability to read a book, because she finds the words sliding and dancing all over the page. Esther observes that she cannot eat, sleep, read, or write. These problems lead her to actually consult a psychiatrist and Esther consults Dr. Gordon. Esther reaches Gordon sleep deprived and tells him that she has given up changing clothes or washing her hair since three weeks.

Esther's instant dislike for Gordon rises from the fact that he is good looking. Esther concludes that the picture of his happy family on his desk is deliberately kept there to ward off any off Esther's unwanted advances. As it is described in Esther's words,

I hated him the minute I walked in through the door. I had imagined a kind, ugly, intuitive man looking up and saying, Ah! In an encouraging way, as if he could see something I couldn't, and then I would find words to tell him how I was so scared, as if I were being stuffed farther and farther into a black, airless sack with no way out. And then, I thought, he would help me, step by step, to be myself again. But doctor Gordon wasn't anything like that. He was young, and good-looking and I could see right away that he was conceited. How could this Doctor help me anyway, with a beautiful wife and beautiful children and a beautiful dog haloing him like the angels on a Christmas Card? (Plath, 107)

Esther undergoes electrocution at the hospital and she compares her experience to her childhood experience of accident electrocution with her father's lamp. Esther's disappointment with Gordon's treatment methods leaves her with the thought about suicide. Esther contemplates suicide and the different ways she could do it. She plans to slit her wrists or drown herself, or hang herself even but settles down with the idea of taking excess amount of sleeping pills.

Esther tries various ways to rejuvenate her decaying soul. She volunteers at a local hospital and delivers flowers to a woman who has just given birth. She displeases the woman in a desperate attempt to throw out dead and dying flowers and rearranging the bouquets. Upon her complaint, Esther terminates her activities. Esther considers becoming a Catholic nun as a second resort. But her mother laughs at her idea of conversion into Catholicism. She finds solace only at the grave of her dead father and she realises that she had never cried about her father's death, she had not seen his corpse and she was not allowed to attend his funeral. For Esther, the death of her father seemed unreal. This underlines the father fixation of Esther.

Esther, like Plath, recovers from her suicide attempt and goes to the female psychiatrist Dr. Nolan for help. She secludes herself from other people – her old teachers, employers and even her mother. Under Dr. Nolan's treatment, Esther is slowly able to break the bell jar that she feels had cut her off from the outside world. She finds herself normal, attracted to men like Irvin, she finally manages to make love with him despite in her previous encounters. Esther feels that she resembles to any other women of her age, though she is unable to keep any further relationship with Irvin. She also recognises the fact the bell jar she has lifted with great pain, could anytime descend upon her again.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther describes the relationship between mind and body as one in which each imprisons the other. The mind traps the body literally; it gets Esther locked in a psychiatric hospital. But at the same time, the body traps the mind. It has "little tricks" from preventing her from killing herself. She calls the body "a cage" that prevents the mind from extinguishing itself. "If only there was something wrong with my body", she tells her nurses. She views problems of her mind as different from the problems of her body.

From the psychoanalytic perspective, *The Bell Jar* becomes a key to the complex psyche of both Esther and Plath herself. Esther's slow descent into madness is the result of her ego's incapability that compensates between her id and superego, finally leading to depression and neurosis. The novel may be seen as an attempt from the part of Plath to find relief through confessional mode, an attempt to bring the mysteries of mind into the conscious realm. Writing may have been a sort of relief mechanism. Psychoanalysis becomes a vital tool in deciphering the nuances of a complex work.

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