



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

THE TRAGIC ROUTE FOR SURVIVAL IN SYLVIA PLATH'S NOVEL *THE BELL JAR*

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doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.74.109



ABSTRACT

Woman not only in the American society but in the entire world loses her enthusiasm due to man's domination that makes her feels lost and of no hope. Living in complete depression, woman has no intention to involve in any specific work.

Many novelists write about the depression and its effect upon woman's character and her behaviors. But woman should overcome the depression and struggle to achieve her goals in time man dominated every field in society. Because of gender inequality woman feels discontented with her position in modern society. Therefore, she must rebel to get her freedom and identity.

Self- confidence and discipline are so necessary for woman to achieve her personal identity which is considered as a vital part in life. Hence, woman should fight against any kind of oppression, injustice, and suppression under the strict traditions.

Key words: depression, identity, discontented, freedom, gender inequality, goals, domination, rebel, oppression.

Introduction

The Bell Jar (1963) as a semi-autobiographical novel reflects Plath's struggles with depression. Like her protagonist Esther, Plath came from Boston, lost her father and won an internship in 1953 on a glamorous New York magazine. She was one of the earliest poets to write in a confessional mode. Her father died when she was eight. A marvelous student, she won scholarships to attend Smith and Cambridge University. Where she met and married the poet Ted Hughes, they had two children, but their marriage was bumpy. She won a great ovation for her book of poetry *The Colossus* as well other poems published in 1960. She suffered with depression, and the novel is based on her experience. It was published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, then appeared in 1966 three years later under Plath's real name after she committed suicide. Plath suffered from mental illness

throughout her life and she collapsed into deep depression as her marriage dissolved. Eventually, she committed suicide in 1963. The past possessed her mind and she is afflicted with the conflict between external brilliance and achievements a bitter sense of loneliness.

This novel illustrates the dilemma facing a woman who struggles to gain her identity when trapped within the darkness imposed by her mind. Esther lost her expectations as well as her control during her journey of self-discovery. Esther offers a paradigm girl formed between her alter ego to be a writer and the destructive negative gaze of others. She refuses to be subordinated to the duality and the double standard of society's hypocrisy which isolates her from reality, then leads her to mental breakdown which causes her later to commit suicide. Finally, she learns from madness to gain her agency as well as she graduates from a mental

institution, not from school, and thus obtains her independence.

The violent circumstances and the supercilious society affect Esther's personality for preventing her from expressing herself and her thoughts in a way she prefers. The events develop during her journey in the mental institution. Esther's path to gain her liberation is filled with electroshock therapy's pain. She constantly wonders what she had done to deserve such a punishment. During Esther's gloominess and internal darkness, she suffered depression and mood swings as a result of an imbalance in her physical body, but she continues to resist superficial society. She almost continuously begins to feel a sense of unreality, which gradually grows and becomes unbearable. As a result, attempted suicide and madness follow.

The Bell Jar essentially, illustrates Esther's struggles with depression as she seeks to make herself known as a writer in the 1950's. The first part of the novel focused on her obtaining an internship with Ladies' Day magazine in New York City. While she works at this magazine, she has begun to lose her control and cannot find her satisfaction. She disintegrates under her depression due to feeling that she doesn't fit in, and ultimately ends up being put in a mental hospital. Still, she recounts the depth of her depression as she says "Wherever I sat - on the deck of a ship or at a street a cafe in Paris or Bangkok - I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air" (*Bell Jar* 178). The symbolic meaning of *The Bell Jar* refers to Esther's isolation from the people and her separation from her world as well as being stuck and trapped in the same place.

It is obvious that the novel's title symbolizes not only her asphyxiation and mental illness, but also the inner struggle of Plath's alter ego and the protagonist of the novel Esther Greenwood, the thickness of the Bell Jar's glass detaches Esther from freeing herself and also she is trapped as a prisoner from seeing clearly through misrepresentation.

The Bell Jar is set in 1950s America, when American society principally shaped by traditional values and patriarchy framework. Society designs particular constraints on women as it expects them

to embody traditional models of purity and chastity and to aspire to the life of a domestic mother and homemaker rather than pursuing their own careers. Many women, like Esther Greenwood, feel broken by the expectations 1950s American society places on them. Hence, it explores issues of sexual morality, sanity, and womanhood. It presents a complex, intricate vision of many life experiences which Esther confronts.

Esther and eleven girls live in the Amazon hotel to be protected from the seduction of men and remain chaste. The Amazon indicates strong women warriors noted for their pride and courage, who rode horses, fought battles against Greek heroes and stand against sexism and men control. At the beginning of the novel the execution of the Rosenbergs who were sentenced to death because of their espionage for the Soviet Union and the way they were executed by electrocution foreshadows Esther's electric shock treatment as well as foreshadowing her later attempts to kill herself.

Esther represents Plath's alter ego who attempts suicide numerous times by various means through a nervous breakdown. So, the novel portrays the struggles of a woman who cannot reach her goals in a male-dominated society. Esther presents how society is not ready for a woman who feels unsatisfied with her status by tracing a story of woman's rebellion while gaining her identity. Although as a female she desires to be a poet or an English professor. But her dream completely disappeared when her mother tells her that she was not accepted to the summer writing program. Although she wins a scholarship and a fashion magazine competition, this pushes Esther over the edge of depression. She obsesses more and more by trying to kill herself. This is like *Virginia Woolf* displays in "*A Room of One's own*" Shakespeare's Sister, Judith who committed suicide due to failure her dream and failure to be writer, although she is talented as her brother but receives no education, trapped in the home and by the confines of the expectations of women. She wants to go into acting but confronts with rejection. She is finally seduced by a theater-manager and becomes pregnant. "But the man laughed in her face", "No woman he said, could possibly be an actress" (*Woolf* 2216). The

society representing man's ego and her family represented by her father who forced her to marry against her will, which result in her ultimate suicide and her genius goes unexpressed.

The Bell Jar develops Esther Greenwood's character through two significant causes of her depression, one of them was the society and gender inequality. She comes from a modest family and finds herself unsatisfied with her life. A second cause of her anxiety is sexual repression when she intends to lose her virginity to discover the answer behind the mystery. In addition, Esther imagines the fig tree where each one represents a choice in her life unable making any decision to choose a fig and unsure of what she wants. She feels paralyzed by indecision, because she desires all of them. The fig tree is mentioned twice in the novel. First one in chapter five "I wanted to crawl in between those black lines of print the way you crawl through a fence and, go to sleep under that beautiful big green fig-tree." (51) The second in chapter seven "I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just 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 set there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet."(73)

Sexuality seems to be as a negative issue for woman only available after marriage to preserve her purity, whereas for a man the social norms let him engage in sexual activity before his marriage. Esther oscillates between Betsy and Doreen, the former as a symbol of innocence and a naïve girl, whereas the latter is urban and liberated. But suburban Esther prefers Doreen although she causes trouble for her. Doreen as a free girl represents bizarre and violent sexual activity. According to Esther sex is remarkably bound by passion, not with violence or physical harm, this is why she has fallen back onto her relationship with Doreen and chooses the safe road and repression represented by Betsy. Esther never feels unified, nevertheless she criticizes the superficiality of the world of girls and magazine in New York. She suffers to find out the woman inside of her and meaning of being a woman in contemporary society.

As a woman from American society Esther loses her enthusiasm and she cannot understand the real reason behind that. She feels lost and also is without specific direction. Furthermore, Esther constantly struggles to keep herself away from illusions and at the same time she has no energy to become involved in any specific work. The reasons which lead to Esther's frustration are the death of the Rosenbergs the infamous couple who obsess and horrify her as a political event which resulted in increasing her alienation and her uprising against the 1950s position. In addition, the venomous atmosphere which surrounds the magazine world and the wealthy girls who embody happiness, freedom and courtesy, only spoiled and artificial to her. Hence, the novel highlights Esther, who begins to lose her self-confidence, foreshadowing her growing disillusionment. New York City is supposed to be a land for romantic, happy love, to give her a chance to meet fascinating men, instead, she was disturbed by inappropriate men. Doreen's sexual encounter with Lenny proves ugly and awful when Lenny plays a song that idealizes faithful love and marriage but, calls Doreen a "bitch" (*Bell Jar* 16), when she bites him. The excitement of a big city, material success, love, and romance, gets rephrased as an execution, selfishness and brutality.

Esther in chapter two describes herself as a person with multiple personalities. She is torn into multiple pieces foreshadowing her problems through her mental situation. She is sunk into deep despair and sadness which leads her to commit suicide in many and various ways. She is fascinated by the idea of death, when she feels she is losing her power to control her life, she starts to try to control her own death. She couldn't read or sleep, and this is killing her because she lives for reading, she has always been the first of her class and gained awards. She wishes to write, as *Cixous* encourages women to write in " *The laugh of the Medusa*" says "I wished that that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim". (*Cixous* 2040)

In addition, Esther appreciates Buddy Willard as an American ideal male with a scientific mind, she sees him as near to perfection, as she sees

his merits and recognizes his flaws when she knows he spends a summer sleeping with the waitress and never apologizes. At that time this was an act considered as normal behavior. Esther rejects this double standard, and a woman must discipline her behavior and must stay pure until marriage explaining, "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." (77) He does not understand Esther's desire to write poetry and likens a poem to "a piece of dust", Buddy makes Esther lose her self-confidence by telling her this desire will disappear as soon as she becomes a mother. She rejects his proposal as well as his way of life. *Sylvia Path* conveys the struggle between Esther's mind and her body by her intention to retry the experience of the skiing slope although, she breaks her leg, foreshadowing her attempts to kill herself. She refused to be a submissive wife and mother and also refuses to deny her ambitions to be a writer. On the other hand, Buddy Willard remains arrogant and rude despite his tuberculosis. He tells Esther to come to the hospital in order to prove that she deserves his love but, she rejects him.

Lenny Shepherd's persuades his friend Frankie to keep Esther company, but she treats him coldly because she is taller than him and far from this, she informs him of a false name, Elly Higginbottom. She as well rejects Marco, who attempts to rape her, who considers himself as superior with his sexuality besides his financial power. She describes him as if impervious to his money, giving her a diamond stickpin and treating her violently until she punches him in the nose, Marco relents and demands his diamond. When Esther's face is smeared with Marco's blood, she sees her reflection in the mirror, this represents her maintaining her honor and as if it is a medal of honor as well as referring to her resistance to Marco's sexual assault. She immediately recognizes him as "a woman hater" who wants to buy her body, independence and freedom with his financial power and put them beneath his desire. As *Alban* says in "*The Medusa Gaze*" "Girls are not only objectified dolls as models of beauty on which to project their own playful wishes and anxieties. They may exert power over such objects, practice female roles with

them such as mothering, or maybe see them as models for themselves." (*Alban* 68).

The young Esther resists to be an object for his needs. Through the meeting between Esther and Doreen with her boyfriend, she notes the violence through sexual practices, Esther gradually begins losing her control through resisting the arrogance of society. The same society which gives the freedom to Buddy expects and forces Esther to be virgin until her marriage. She realizes the hypocrisy of society's mores and attempts to lose her virginity before marriage in order to discover herself. According to Esther there is no difference between man and woman, they are equal in all matters of life as *Simone De Beavoir* in "*The Second Sex*" says "The men of today show a certain duplicity of attitude which is painfully lacerating to women as a fellow being an; equal but they still require her to remain the inessential" (1413). Esther sacrifices her virginity to gain experience. Her bleeding symbolizes a ritual sacrifice. She gives her blood and her body for the sake of her peace of mind.

Mrs. Greenwood's Role in The Bell Jar

Esther denies her authentic identity by claiming she is an orphan as well as disavowing the existence of her parents. Through the young Esther's pain, she continues to use the pseudonym Elly Higginbottom even when she meets the sailor when they were kissing each other in Boston Common. The main reason behind that is her relationship with her mother Mrs. Greenwood, Plath does not give her a name or major role in the novel signifying the bad relationship with her mother. Like other characters as Esther partly hates her mother, perhaps the latter is old fashioned, agrees with society's notions about a woman and the importance of chastity. While she constantly encourages Esther to chase her ambitions to be a writer and to work as a secretary as long as it does not contradict her domestic responsibilities, Esther partially blames her mother for her madness:

My own mother wasn't much help. My mother had taught shorthand and typing to support us ever since my father died, and secretly she hated it and hated him for dying and leaving no money because he didn't trust life insurance salesmen. She

was always on to me to learn shorthand after college, so I'd have a practical skill as well as a college degree. (*Bell Jar* 39).

In Chapter sixteen Esther rejects the roses from her mother during her visit to Esther. She says that "Save them for my funeral" (*Bell Jar*195). Esther behaves cruelly to her mother, telling her to save the roses for her funeral and throwing away the flowers in her mother's presence. Esther never seems to realize what her mother suffered. She begs Esther to know what she did wrong. This treatment seems heartless because Esther has seen the horrible worry her mother endured when she was missing and, heard her daughter whimpering in the basement. However, her mother considered the closest person to Esther may be fails to understand her daughter's suffering.

Furthermore, in contrast when Esther tries to tell her mother about pain from Electric shock therapy, Mrs. Greenwood is concerned for social consequences rather than her daughter's health. When Esther refused to take more electroshock treatments which indicates her mother's concerns about Esther's reputation, not her recovering mental health." My mother smiled. I know my baby wasn't like that. I looked at her like what? Like those awful people "(140).

Although Mrs. Greenwood works hard and expects her children to succeed, she is pictured as a woman without much feeling. She tries to encourage her daughter to chase her writing career, but Esther feels that her mother doesn't truly believe in her. She wants her to earn money to secure herself by learning shorthand in order to find work as a secretary. Esther considers shorthand as a domestic life and therefore refused it.

Accordingly, Esther refused to be a secretary. She hated the idea of serving man as well as resisted the idea that woman obey or serves man who considers himself as a superior figure as well as the dominant gender. Esther's mother's warnings, why Esther cannot achieve her dream to gain happy future and makes her difficult to decide with her life, causing her to lose her self-confidence and even harder to believe in her qualities. A major concern in 1950s is the fear of becoming one's mother a serious

issue for American Middle -Class girls as, Alban says that "The mother as a catch-all source of blame" (*Alban* 262). As well says "They remain blamed for any incapacity against life's troubling experiences, regardless of their attempts to bring up their children with love" (262). *Silvia Plath* conveys this relationship by describing pain and helplessness on the daughter and mother's side, although they loved each other, but they lose that love when they start blaming each other.

Esther's father's death, left Mrs. Greenwood with her children without money or life insurance, causing her to go through bitter and hard times to take care of her family. May be that caused a big hole between Esther and her mother. Consequently, she gains Ester's rebuke for lacking attention and taking blame for Esther's suffering. Mrs. Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* represents the scapegoat of her daughter's circumstances and illness.

Esther realizes during her destination towards the mental institution that rebirth is inevitable as well as death is inevitable for rebirth, whether she gains pain or sacrifices her body. Consequently, Esther's struggle comes from her failure to choose who she wants to be. She is fascinated by the mirror as if she recognizes her reflection or her soul. She catches sight of herself in the elevator mirror through Rosenberg's execution. This situation personally horrifies Esther and foreshadows what will come when Esther receives electroshock treatment. She expresses her sympathy for their dreadful death, which she goes through later in her experience. In contrast Hilda relishes the idea when she says that "I'm so glad they're going to die" (*Bell Jar*106). Esther suffers from her breakdown and she starts to feel detached from herself.

Esther during her treatment notices the patients as if inhuman and lifeless, which indicates Esther enters into a strange and dreadful world. She gradually prepares for killing herself in different ways. She tries to hang or drown herself, but she fails. She starts to lose her balance and enters into the darkness. Furthermore, she feels as if transported down into the earth as well. She sees

light, then begins to cry until she regains her awareness. *Plath* brings the part of reality with the nightmare to convey Esther's internal conflict. She asks the nurse for a mirror to see her picture. She fails to recognize herself. Her reflection causes her paralysis by exposing her ontological defenselessness. She sees as if a painted picture with hair shaved off and the face purple with brown mouth, as if she sees a colorful image a "supernatural conglomeration of bright colours" (*Bell Jar* 183), *Plath* in chapter fourteen uses the mirror in order to describe Esther's mental state. Furthermore, Esther breaking the mirror suggested she is going to recover her health. Even when she acts ungratefully toward the visitors signifies her ability of feeling even if her emotions are negative. The broken mirror may refer to how she finally deserts societal norms that imprisoned her before her attempts of killing herself. "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream." (*Bell Jar* 227).

The novelist equates sexuality with pain during the encounter between Esther and the professor of mathematics named Irwin to initiate this rite of passage into womanhood, despite its cost of heavy hemorrhaging (Alban 154). *Plath* conveys that to gain freedom, it is not without consequences. *Plath* tries to convey her moral attitude toward Esther's behavior with a man who she hardly knows as a punishment for her immorality or through her painful situation gains her self-confidence juxtaposed with hemorrhaging. Doctor Nolan Esther's psychiatrist helps Esther at the private mental hospital and Esther comes to trust and love her, she acts understanding like a surrogate mother. Progressive Dr. Nolan encourages Esther's unusual thinking as well as encourages her to gain her sexual freedom. But she repeatedly tries to give Esther permission to hate her mother as if implying mother hatred.

Esther leaves the asylum moving towards her freedom, recovered completely as well as she is capable to make her independent decision. When Irwin asks her that if he can see her once more, she says "never" (*Bell jar*232). As well she says that "I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person... just because of

sex, freedom from... regardless" I was my own woman". (*The Bell Jar* 213).

One's personal identity is the important vital part of life. Without knowing our identity and our uniqueness to perceive life it will be difficult for others to understand us. Esther Greenwood struggles to find her own identity, and to discover the person inside her. *The Bell Jar* highlights the duality of society which contributed greatly to the oppression of women and the suppression of them under strict traditions. Esther's melancholy continues to reject the arrogance of society. Through using the first person narrator, *Plath* introduces her protagonist to evoke a sense of tragedy as well as to build a sense of self-loss Esther transformed her thoughts and inner conflict to make the reader understand the suffering of women at that time in 1953. *The Bell Jar* exemplifies Esther's feeling of being trapped in a world that she can neither accept nor reject. Both *Plath* and Esther suffer from the same circumstances, the same sort of glass bell jar which causes them neither to breathe nor to be free from the conventions of society.

Esther recognizes the emptiness of her ambitions as well as the loss of her expectations leading to focus on the means of death to kill herself rather than the reason for death. Because death seems like the only way to stop her pain. She feels that her only choice is to shut down her mind by sacrificing her body. When she fails to slit her wrists, she explains "It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, a whole lot harder to get at." (*Bell Jar* 142). She understands as if her body is not the enemy. The schism between her mind and the world is the true enemy that Esther cannot reach. The restricted role of women leads them to be the prey of an oppressive society. If women in previous eras refused to be the angel in the house, because she had moral responsibilities as well, and needed private space and money to be a writer, today's woman becomes strong and faces many challenges being a mother and a writer, beside her numerous duties as a teacher, a doctor ...etc..

Conclusion

In this novel, Plath emphasized the psychological dilemmas faced by Esther as well as human the physical relationships by shedding light on American women and her thirst for liberation. Esther's rebellious spirit during her journey through the madness realized her existence as an integrated entity. Furthermore, her voyage from innocent girl to experience as well, her struggle between her soul and her body, it contributes to her rising as well, smashing the glass of the bell jar, despite her terrible attempts to commit suicide. Women find the solution for this dilemma, they must fight to be the leader of their thoughts, mind and her body. As well to be a rival to man in all fields, especially art and literature because language is the ultimate weapon to convey their voice. In addition, critically, Plath uses Esther's childlike, innocent eyes and the resonance of her voice to make the readers understand the huge impact of a society that ignores to hear women's cries for justice. *Plath's* heroine eventually, gives strong glimpse of hope for women who are still fighting against society's prejudice.

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