

The Female Mental Disorder as a Reaction to Patriarchal Practices in Sylvia Plath's Autobiographical Novel *The Bell Jar*

الاضطراب العقلي الأنثوي كرد فعل على الممارسات الأبوية في رواية السيرة الذاتية لسيلفيا بلاث

الناقوس الزجاجي

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Abstract:

This paper aims at shedding light on the female mental disorder from a positive perspective. The connections between women's gender, their mental disorder, and their psychological state are scrutinized within a feminist scope since the feminist approach is required in this context. Indeed, under the umbrella of feminism, women are able to reject oppression and discover their identity. Moreover, many female autobiographical novels, such as Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, are recognised by the presence of women's mental disorder. The findings reveal that gender and the patriarchal practices lie at the heart of women's mental disorder, but, fortunately, the latter is considered as a form of rebellion rather than a form of weakness. Thus, this study emphasizes the fact that madness can lead to the formation of an integrated self and a free space away from the traditional social demands.

Keywords: The Female Mental Disorder, Madness, Patriarchy, Autobiographical Novel, Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*.

ملخص البحث

يهدف هذا المقال إلى تسليط الضوء على الاضطراب النفسي الأنثوي من منظور إيجابي، و يركز كذلك على فحص الصلة بين جنس المرأة واضطرابها العقلي وحالتها النفسية، اعتمادا على النظرية النسوية التي تعتبر ملائمة لهذا السياق. في الواقع، تحت مظلة الحركة النسوية، تستطيع النساء رفض الاضطهاد واكتشاف هويتهم. إضافة إلى هذا، فإن العديد من روايات السيرة الذاتية النسائية تركز على الاضطراب العقلي لدى النساء، مثل رواية سيلفيا بلاث الناقوس الزجاجي. وتكشف نتائج هذا العمل أن الجنس والممارسات الأبوية تؤدي إلى حدوث الاضطراب

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العقلي للمرأة، ولكن، لحسن الحظ، يعتبر هذا الأخير شكلاً من أشكال التمرد وليس شكلاً من أشكال الضعف . والغرض من هذه الدراسة هو التأكيد على أن الجنون يمكن أن يؤدي إلى تكوين نفس متكاملة وفضاء حر بعيداً عن المطالب الاجتماعية التقليدية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاضطراب العقلي لدى الأنثى، الجنون، الأبوية، رواية السيرة الذاتية، سيلفيا بلاث، الناقد الزجاجي.



Introduction

It is believed that society is the most dominant hindrance that faces women in general and women writers in particular. It imposes overwhelming pressures on the individual, leading even to mental disorder and ultimate suicide. Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* depicts the impact of these pressures on a woman's soul and body. Although *The Bell Jar* was published in 1963, it echoes the recurrent issues and topics of nowadays, especially the conflict between getting married and pursuing a career in a patriarchal society. The novel's protagonist, Esther Greenwood, is a brilliant young woman, who wishes to assert her identity and to reject the social constraints of her 1950s American society, but she ends up having a mental illness and attempting suicide. The purpose of this paper is to concentrate on the notion of female mental disorder in *The Bell Jar* as being a positive reaction against the patriarchal attitudes; insanity can lead to revival and liberation. Relying on an elaborate first-person narration, Plath succeeds in conveying her heroine's ideas, emotions, and actions. Indeed, readers cannot avoid noticing the resemblance between Plath and Esther since *The Bell Jar* is an autobiographical novel. Finally, it is worthwhile to pay attention to Esther's eventual recovery and rebirth as marking the novel's positive end.

Sylvia Plath is a popular 20th century American author. In addition to being a famous poet, she wrote *The Bell Jar*, her only novel, which focuses on the contradiction between Esther's unconventional expectations and the harsh attitude of the 1950s American society vis-à-vis women. The females were expected to perform the role of the obedient wife, mother, and housekeeper. They were motivated to marry, not to work. The novel tells the story of the young talented Esther who wishes to become an independent writer, but she rather undergoes mental breakdown and, accordingly, suicide attempts, due to the social rigidity. Plath clearly reveals the connections between the social norms and Esther's journey through depression and suicide, foreshadowing the fact that depression can be the fate of women who try to defy society's expectations. Therefore, the bell jar symbolizes the

feeling of entrapment. Actually, the novelist's own life experiences are reflected in her work.

Gender disparity, which has been deeply embedded in the social system of male-dominated societies, has granted men superiority over women. Female experiences have been viewed as insignificant while male experiences have been granted priority and worth. Moreover, gender inequality has imposed heavy restrictions on women. Additionally, the females have been believed to be mentally fragile due to the patriarchal practices and the misogynistic attitudes. In male-dominated societies, women's common gendered experiences have emanated "not causally from supposed 'biological facts' but women's common experience of oppression. That is, 'woman' is a socially and politically constructed category" (Stanley and Wise, 1990, p. 21). Hence, gender is a social, cultural, and political construct unlike sex, which is a biological characteristic.

Indeed, women have experienced gender discrimination at the level of both the private and the public arenas. They have been kept voiceless and passive. Such a fact has been caused by the socially imposed gender-based hierarchy. Undoubtedly, patriarchy has had a close connection to women's oppression and subordination and to their acquisition of gendered identities. Starting at the level of the family where the girls have been discriminated against, patriarchy, the pervasive phenomenon, has been fostered by society, religion, and education. The feminist critic Sylvia Walby has defined patriarchy as

a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. The use of the term social structures is important here, since it clearly implies rejection both of biological determinism, and the notion that every individual man is in a dominant position and every woman in a subordinate one. (Walby, 2010, p. 30)

Consequently, patriarchy, the seemingly natural and invisible practice, implies men's dominance over women; however, it is not a constant despite the fact that it is a universal phenomenon. Rather, it can change over time since it is not biologically or naturally determined. Thus, men and women can achieve more or less important social positions.

Actually, women have struggled against patriarchy at the level of both the private and the public spheres since they have been stifled by private cruelty inside the family and public bias outside the home as well. The female shared experiences have created a bond of solidarity and sisterhood among women to shatter the patriarchal foundation. Flourishing in the twentieth

century, the feminist movement has emerged as a revolution against the gender-based discrimination and the distorted female image at the level of the various fields. It has been viewed as women's liberator from oppression and marginalization. Thanks to the advent of the feminist movement in general, and feminist literary criticism in particular, there has been a considerable interest in women's works, which has led to the re-evaluation of women's writing and their contribution to the literary tradition as well as the recovery of a lot of previously ignored works. As a consequence, the gap between the males and the females has been reduced, and the female identity has been discovered since feminism has helped women to achieve equal rights as men.

Additionally, important landmarks in the development of feminist literary criticism include the British writer Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which concentrates on the disadvantages imposed upon women writers by their patriarchal societies, and the French writer Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), which scrutinizes women's role in societies, their status as being the second sex in androcentric societies, and their depiction by male writers in fiction. Both Woolf and de Beauvoir were among the first to examine the female image and sexism in the works of the male writers. The Indian feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) is also an influential essay. It highlights the historical and ideological elements that hinder the voice of the marginalized individuals, or the subalterns, from being heard and that prevent them from making their own decisions. It also focuses on the hegemonic structures that appear in Western scholars' works. According to Spivak, the subaltern woman is situated in the shadow. She states that the female subaltern, as compared to her male counterpart, is "even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak, 1988, p. 287). Thus, she questions the phenomenon of the colonial subject.

Moreover, the concept of gender has been a relevant factor that has had a close affinity with the domination of female mental disorders, such as anxiety, madness, hysteria, depression, and schizophrenia. The female experiences could be damaging to mental health. Indeed, the females, more than their male counterparts, have been prone to mental breakdowns. Mental disorder can be defined as

a syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotion regulation, or behavior that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning. Mental disorders are usually associated with significant distress or disability in social, occupational, or other

important activities. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 20)

Therefore, mental disorder has often been associated with the individual's social and economic conditions.

Furthermore, in *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter has revealed the stereotypical association of the feminine with 'madness,' which is the individual's abnormal behaviour. Indeed, women have been viewed as mentally delicate, and they have been vulnerable to madness, which has been conceived as a female malady (Showalter, 1987, p. 4). Feminine nature and female sexuality have also been established as the cause of female malady. Therefore, the mental sickness has been perpetually feminised. Additionally, gender, as a pertinent factor, has been closely related to women's mental disorder. Many female problems have been caused by their gender roles and gender relations, as Jenny Hockey has pointed out:

In effect, women are placed in a double bind in relation to psychiatry. Not only is madness a particularly extreme manifestation of the behaviour expected of a 'normal' woman, but women who display independence or an aggressive resistance to their social roles risk receiving a psychiatric label. (Hockey, 1993, p. 254-5)

Hence, the gendered nature of the female mental disorder has been an undeniable fact. In other words, women's gendered identities have negatively influenced their mental health. In addition, women's restricted social roles, such as carers and housekeepers, have triggered tremendous psychological damage to them.

Likewise, women's revolt against the attributed roles and the stereotypical images has been considered as a sort of psychiatric trouble. The American psychotherapist and writer Phyllis Chesler has emphasized the fact that all women have been subject to madness and that "women who reject or are ambivalent about the female role frighten both themselves and society so much that their ostracism and self-destructiveness probably begin very early. Such women are also assured of a psychiatric label and, if they are hospitalized, it is for less 'female' behaviours..." (Chesler, 1997, p. 93). Thus, women who have sought independence and have revealed resistance to their domestic roles have been labeled as having psychiatric disorders.

Moreover, the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's theory of madness is worthwhile to mention. According to him, insanity and health are conceived as closely related phenomena, not as contradictory states, since they have various mental structures and strategies in common.

Hegel further argues that madness is considered as derailed reason. He points out:

“Insanity [is] an essential...[and] necessarily occurring form or stage...in the development of the soul”–not, of course, in the sense that we are all inevitably destined to derangement, but rather because madness represents a constantly threatening and yet seductive possibility prepared for by our encounter with the fundamentally alienating character of life. Further, there are certain essential “contradictions” and “oppositions” that Hegel sees as inherent in madness which are “still preserved” and mirrored in the rational mind. (Berthold-Bond, 1994, p. 71)

Accordingly, madness occurs when the self reacts and attempts to retreat itself from an alienating social environment into a private inner world. Hence, Hegel views the psychological treatment as the only therapy for madness, relying on the rational elements that persist to exist in spite of the individual’s withdrawal into insanity in order to retrieve the affinity with the real world.

In addition, madness has frequently been viewed as a response to the struggle between the inner eagerness to achieve independence and the outer reality of submissiveness. Indeed, the female consciousness is the stimulus that has stood behind women’s refusal of the socially imposed subordinate status. Indeed, the theme of madness has frequently been present in women’s works. In addition to their female protagonists, the female artists themselves, such as Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, have frequently undergone mental health problems as the price of their creative expression in an androcentric culture. Women’s insanity, as a gendered issue, has been more likely to necessitate medical care since the females have often suffered from violence and trauma.

The figure of the madwoman has appeared as an essential point in literary works and feminist discussion. In fact, women writers’ anger against the cruel patriarchal attitudes has been disclosed through the employment of the symbolic image of the madwoman: “The madwoman is the author’s double, the incarnation of her own anxiety and rage. It is through the violence of this double that ‘the female author enacts her own raging desires to escape male houses and male texts’” (Showalter, 1987, p. 4). Furthermore, feminist critics have attempted to decrypt the emblematic image of the madwoman in literary works in relation to society’s hierarchical structure. Insanity has been regarded as a form of rebellion and a space of self-integration rather than a

form of desperate weakness.

Madness has involved the awakening of the true self thanks to its contact with the primary instincts and feelings, as the Scottish psychiatrist Ronald David Laing has stated, “true sanity entails in one way or another the dissolution of the normal ego, that false self competently adjusted to our alienated social reality” (Laing, 1967, p. 119). Consequently, insanity has defied its negative traditional classification as a malady. Rather, it has been viewed as a positive stage for the mind’s healing from the trauma of the social chaos and as a new form of consciousness, psychic growth, wisdom, and liberation. Madness has been considered as a natural remedy in an insane real world and “the mad person as symptom and as victim of a sick society and finally as prophet of a possible new world” (Vlastos, 1976, p. 246). Hence, insanity could lead to psychic revival.

Furthermore, acquiring an employment and being financially independent can positively influence the female mental health. In fact, the paid job can grant women identity, self-esteem, and a better social status, providing them, therefore, with the opportunity to get rid of the stereotypical and confining roles attributed to them. In this respect, feminism has undoubtedly helped women achieve better status in all the fields. Undoubtedly, women’s empowerment has led to the decrease of gender-based inequalities.

Finally, this study attempts to display Esther’s embarrassment in an oppressive social environment that hinders her ambition to become a writer. This leads to her madness, which is tackled from a positive view. Her ultimate recovery signals the positive end of the novel.

I- Esther’s Unconventional Expectations in *The Bell Jar*

Plath’s *The Bell Jar* is an autobiographical novel. The autobiographical novel is a novelistic form which involves autobiographical and fictional elements. Fictional does not mean unreal; rather, it denotes that it is an imaginative reproduction of people and incidents. The autobiographical novel flourished especially at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Moreover, many autobiographical novels are written in the first person, and this indicates the utility of telling a story through a participant’s eyes in order to convey the special lived feature of life. Furthermore, the autobiographical novel focuses on experience, and it depicts spiritual evolution. Indeed, thanks to the autobiographical novel, the novelist can reveal some elements in a person that may be concealed in real life. Many readers find it pleasing to recognize the authors’ lives. Additionally, the autobiographical novel grants the individual “the space and permission to focus on oneself. It allows one to work through

ideas about one's identity and one's intrinsic worth as a human being. It allows reflection from a safe distance – without incurring judgement on one's life" (qtd. in Hunt, 2000, p. 152). Consequently, this safe tool protects the writer from negative judgements.

Moreover, the autobiographical novel has achieved a crucial position in modern fiction history. Many writers, including even women writers, have expressed themselves and their own experiences through the autobiographical novels. Very often, the clash between the private and the public constitutes the topic of women's autobiographical writings since women live in contradiction between the social choices and the inner requirements. Additionally, female autobiographical novels are characterised by the presence of madness. The heroines usually suffer from mental disorder. Furthermore, writing autobiographical novels is similar to psychotherapeutic process. Both of them focus on the self and the achievement of a deep insight into the self and the other individuals. Writing about traumas reduces pain and stress. In fact, autobiographical novels can be used as a device for self-therapy, and the writers favour characters with identical defensive strategies as theirs. Women authors create female protagonists who attain considerable growth, strength, maturity, and success after overcoming several barriers. In fact, the British journalist and writer Rosalind Coward has pinpointed the fact that most women writers' autobiographical novels tend to depict female heroines who represent the females as a group since "the autobiographical voice of most of these contemporary women-centred novels often appeal to a collectivity. I am, but I am a representative of all women. The history of my oppression is the history of all women's oppression" (Coward, 1997, p. 35). Thus, the personal female autobiographical voice is also collective. These novels create a private space for self-representation, identity affirmation, and resistance against the patriarchal attitudes.

Sylvia Plath's unique autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* was published in January 1963 under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas." It is an American literary masterpiece that tackles womanhood and the toxic cultural expectations of 1950s America. Plath declares about her novel:

What I've done is to throw together events from my own life, fictionalizing to add color – it's a pot boiler really, but I think it will show how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown....I've tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar. (Plath, 2012, p. 83)

Thus, the world and people are depicted through a distorting lens. Plath tries

to capture the female dilemma and the suffocating atmosphere of being depressed under the bell jar.

Indeed, *The Bell Jar* is, as the author Emily Miller Budick refers to it, “a solution to the sociological problems of women, a language and an art competent to secure women, especially the female writer, against male domination” (Budick, 1987, p. 872). Through this novel, Plath encourages women to reject the confining social roles and to achieve independence and self-control. Additionally, the American poet and novelist Erica Jong states: “The reason a woman has greater problems becoming an artist is because she has greater problems becoming a self” (Jong, 1980, p. 116). Hence, when the female genuine self is discovered, the woman can express herself in her own words, symbols, and images through art.

Employing a first person-narrative, the novel portrays a talented heroine, the nineteen-year-old Esther Greenwood, who struggles against the confining bell jar of the socially imposed gender identity that imprisons her and hinders her from forming her own identity and authentic self. Esther pinpoints “Wherever I sat...I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my sour air” (Plath, 1963, p. 196). Undoubtedly, Esther’s winning of a month-long summer job as a writer for a fashion magazine in New York ignites her self-discovery. Indeed, *The Bell Jar* “is plotted to establish two primary themes: that of Greenwood’s developing identity or lack of it; and that of her battle against submission to the authority of both older people and, more pertinently, of men” (Wagner, 2009, p. 70). The latter theme is sometimes involved in the former one.

Ahead of her time, Esther is against the institution of marriage since it constitutes the real obstacle that deprives the female from achieving her autonomy and that makes her a mere servant. She says:

I would catch sight of some flawless man off in the distance, but as soon as he moved closer I immediately saw he wouldn’t do at all. 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... (Plath, 1963, p. 87).

Therefore, Esther rejects the ideal and restrictive female role from which she feels alienated and with which most women around her seem to be satisfied. Women lose their authentic selves in marriage and its corresponding submissiveness and domestic tasks. She fails to find an appropriate female model that represents her character in the women that she encounters.

Esther's aim is to become an independent writer, rejecting the socially attributed occupation. She cannot fit into the available social patterns. As a good student, she dreams for a better future: "I smiled seeing a pristine, imaginary manuscript floating in mid-air, with Esther Greenwood typed in the upper-right hand corner" (Plath, 1963, p. 108). However, her compliance with the normative gender role is as strong as her desire for independence. Undoubtedly, the patriarchal practices hinder her from forging her desired identity.

Additionally, Esther's dual identity is revealed in the novel. Usually, when she encounters men, she gives the fake name Elly Higginbottom. Later, Doreen, one of the girls that Esther meets in New York during her internship, and the hotel's night maid are outside Esther's room. Doreen, who knows about the fake name, calls her "Elly, Elly, Elly," and the maid calls her "Miss Greenwood, Miss Greenwood, Miss Greenwood." Esther feels confused as if she "had a split personality or something" (Plath, 1963, p. 22). This early scene denotes the doubleness that exists within the protagonist.

Esther's point of view concerning the androcentric dominance is obviously negative. For instance, she refuses to marry Buddy, her boyfriend. She also criticizes the submissiveness of Mrs. Willard, Buddy's mother, who works on a rug out of the wool of her husband's old suits to finally use it as a mere kitchen mat instead of hanging it on a wall. This worth admiring rug is to be stained and indistinguishable in a few days, wasting the hard work of Mrs. Willard, which takes many weeks. Esther points out: "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" (Plath, 1963, p. 88-9). Thus, the wife reveals respect for her husband by using his old suits, but her hard efforts are not estimated, foreshadowing "the dreary wasted life for a girl" (Plath, 1963, p. 88) and the trivial female role in the relationship. In addition, Esther hates "the thought of being under a man's thumb" (Plath, 1963, p. 234). According to her, marriage and motherhood steal the female identity and stifle the woman within the household sphere.

Indeed, Esther's suffering is denoted from the opening of the novel through the electrocution of the Rosenbergs, who are accused of spying on behalf of the Soviet Union: "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick" (Plath, 1963, p. 1). This electrocution is used as a clear metaphor "for the process in which public events work on the private imagination" (Peel,

2007, p. 40). The public events have an impact upon the internal side of the individual. Consequently, the opposition between Esther's unconventional expectations and the rigid norms of her patriarchal society leads to her mental illness.

II- Interpreting Esther's Madness in *The Bell Jar*

The social norms seem to be frustrating to Esther. She remembers Buddy Willard, her boyfriend, reinforcing the patriarchal conventions. He insists on the fact that she will not desire to write poems after having children: "I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state" (Plath, 1963, p. 89). Although it is against her own convictions, Esther gets influenced by Buddy's masculine thoughts. Indeed, women's goals outside the limits of housekeeping and motherhood are suppressed. Additionally, she feels strongly insecure vis-à-vis men. Thus, such a conflict leads to Esther's mental disorder.

Furthermore, Esther finds herself trapped and confused between leading the life that she desires and complying with the common attitudes, but she seems much more influenced by the powerful social conventions. This impact is obvious as she depicts Dodo Conway, the Greenwoods' pregnant neighbour and mother of six children: "A woman not five feet tall, with a grotesque, protruding stomach, was wheeling an old black carriage down the street. Two or three small children of various sizes, all pale, with smudgy faces and smudgy knees, wobbled along in the shadow of her skirts" (Plath, 1963, p. 122). Although Dodo is an unconventional lady, who does not comply with the perfect mother role, everyone likes her in her surrounding. What is important is that she is married and that she has children; this fact is of a significant weight. In addition, the social conventions are powerful: "Over and over, women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity. [...] They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents" (Friedan, 1963, p. 11). Hence, Esther notices that happiness can be achieved by accepting the social conventions that value the roles of the wife and mother despite the fact that she underestimates them.

Esther is full of doubts about her future and feels unable to decide which path to follow: writing or marriage. It is not easy to succeed in both of them simultaneously. Hence, she employs the fig-tree as a metaphor to explain her dilemma:

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 [...].

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. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as 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, 1963, p. 80)

Therefore, it is difficult to opt for only one option. Esther's inner conflict is obvious, and the fig-tree foreshadows her split identity. Her inability to decide leads to her madness.

In Plath's female bildungsroman, all the characters and events trigger Esther's growing consciousness and maturation. In her quest for identity, Esther examines other female role models that she encounters, but she does not find them ideal for her prospective identity. On the one hand, female characters, such as Esther's mother, Mrs. Willard, Dodo Conway, and Betsy, Esther's colleague, friend, and the ideal girl of 1950s America, follow the conventional path. On the other hand, female characters, like Doreen and Dr. Nolan, reject the social conventions and grant Esther alternative ways of thinking. Doreen is a beautiful southern girl whose sexual relationships and rebellious personality against the social conventions attract Esther. Dr. Nolan is Esther's psychiatrist at the private mental hospital whom she both admires and trusts, and who backs up Esther's individualism and unconventional thinking by assuring her that it is not wrong to experience pre-marital sexual relationships and by prescribing her a diaphragm. In addition, Jay Cee is Esther's ambitious boss at the magazine; despite her physical unattractiveness, she is self-confident, and she encourages Esther's ambition. Philomena Guinea is a well-known, generous, and rich novelist who pays for Esther's scholarship as well as her stay in the private mental hospital. Indeed, Jay Cee, Philomena Guinea, and Dr. Nolan reveal an alternative way having careers outside the domestic field. They encourage Esther's ambition. Esther's interactions with these women make her situation more complex by presenting different attitudes towards the concept of womanhood. Hence, all these roles do not seem to suit Esther; she embraces none of them.

In fact, from a feminist perspective, Esther's madness is the outcome of the contradictory forces of the social pressure, which is represented through the image of the suffocating bell jar, and the offered freedom of the outer world. Professor Gayle Whittier states:

Esther Greenwood's primary identity is that of an intellectual woman. According to her society's standards, an "intellectual woman" is herself a cultural contradiction in terms, a disharmonious combination of biology and intelligence. It is in part from this sense of herself as a living paradox that Esther grows increasingly depressed. (Whittier, 1976, p. 130)

Esther finds herself in a struggle to combine her intelligence and the social standards together. She refuses to be a housewife like her mother, and she rejects the institution of marriage that confines women's desires and abilities within a dull atmosphere. She thinks that men get married only in order to exploit women. They never grant them the appropriate compassion. They finance marriage, but, afterwards, women are supposed to surrender and to endure all the conditions. The inner pressures overwhelm Esther, leading to the deterioration and the breakdown of her mental health. Insanity is viewed as a form of revolt against the oppressive social attitudes. The protagonist feels stifled under a bell jar, which "allows the imprisoned sufferer to see but not to connect with other people" (Hawthorn, 1983, 131). This space entraps her.

Esther's perception of her own face denotes her separation from the self. In New York, she begins to see a distorted image of her face when she looks at her reflection on an elevator's door: "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" (Plath, 1963, p. 19). Esther's image seems deformed, and she is unable to recognise herself. Moreover, the sense of alienation from the self persists when she later looks in her mirror: "The face that peered back at me seemed to be peering from the grating of a prison cell after a prolonged beating. It looked bruised and puffy and all the wrong colours" (Plath, 1963, p. 107). Despite the fact that she is in New York, which is an attractive place, she employs prison as a suitable metaphor for her status. Afterwards, when she attempts to commit suicide by using a razor, she says: "I moved in front of the medicine cabinet. If I looked in the mirror while I did it, it would be like watching somebody else, in a book or a play. But the person in the mirror was paralysed and too stupid to

do a thing” (Plath, 1963, p. 156). Hence, the person she views in the mirror is completely different, indicating the sense of dissociation again.

The last scene of this complete detachment happens after her suicide attempt. In the hospital, she asks for a mirror, but when she looks into it, she does not recognize herself. She thinks that she is given a picture, not a mirror:

It wasn't a mirror at all, but a picture. You couldn't tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head. One side of the person's face was purple, and bulged out in shapeless way, shading to green along the edges, and then to a sallow yellow. The person's mouth was pale brown, with a rose-coloured sore at either corner. (Plath, 1963, p. 185).

The last strange image reinforces the earlier feeling of dissociation and otherness and completes Esther's transformation process into an unrecognizable person.

Esther's suicide attempts denote that she wants to kill something inside herself, not to get rid of herself as a whole. When she takes a razor to commit suicide by opening her veins in a bath, she comes to a realization:

But when it came right down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenceless that I couldn't do it. 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, and a whole lot harder to get at. (Plath, 1963, p. 156)

Consequently, she displays affection towards her physical body. She does not want to murder herself, but to eliminate the other inside her.

Undoubtedly, it is highly important to focus on the two psychiatrists who try to cure Esther. The first one is Dr. Gordon, who is a male psychiatrist working at a public hospital. Esther visits him first when she feels depressed, but he is unable to help her. He does not reveal enough attention to her words. Even when she tries to ask him about the shock treatment, she opens her mouth, but “no words came out” (Plath, 1963, p. 150). His conventional appearance and the photograph of his typical wife and children put in his office make him a symbol of patriarchal society. He ends up using cruel electroshock therapy to heal her. She says: “I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant” (Plath, 1963, p. 151). Actually, he harms her more. She adds: “I felt dumb and subdued. Every time I tried to concentrate, my mind glided off, like a skater, into a large empty space, and

pirouetted there, absently” (Plath, 1963, p. 154). Therefore, Esther feels being punished by the public asylum for defying the social conventions and getting away from the domestic sphere. In contrast, the second one is Dr. Nolan, who is a female psychiatrist working at a private hospital. She manages to heal Esther after her suicide attempt by taking her mother’s sleeping pills. She acts as an alternative caring and soft mother for her. Unlike Mrs. Greenwood, she understands Esther’s private self, ambition, and rejection of the confining social role. She teaches her to make her own choices. She also prescribes her a diaphragm, which makes her feel that she is her “own woman” (Plath, 1963, p. 235). Indeed, it is the private asylum that contributes to Esther’s recovery. In addition, in one of her leaves from the hospital after improvement, Esther loses her virginity, with a man named Irwin, and no longer feels the social pressure. Consequently, Esther’s madness constitutes a turning point and a new phase of development and self-discovery.

III- Esther: From Madness to Ultimate Rebirth

Signs of recovery and symbols of freedom and self-control begin to emerge progressively in the novel. The impact of the bell jar, as a metaphor, changes gradually. Thanks to Dr. Nolan’s treatment, Esther feels better. She states: “Doctor Nolan led me through a door into fresh, blue-skied air. All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air” (Plath, 1963, p. 227). Dr. Nolan steadily leads Esther out of the suffocating bell jar. Additionally, Esther moves towards freedom. She says: “I took up the silver knife and cracked off the cap of my egg. Then I put down the knife and looked at it. I tried to think what I had loved knives for, but my mind slipped from the noose of the thought and swung, like a bird, in the centre of empty air” (Plath, 1963, p. 228). Thus, the image of the knife, which represents suicide, is substituted by the image of the free bird, which stands for release. The positive influence of the second treatment, which is provided by Dr. Nolan, is evident.

Another essential character whose appearance is of paramount importance in the second half of the novel is Joan Gilling. She is Esther’s companion in the mental hospital. She acts as Esther’s double in the novel. Both of them are prone to the same mental illness and undergo treatment in the same hospital. They come from the same town and pursue their studies in the same college. Both of them date Buddy Willard. They are talented, and they challenge the social norms. Although they share similar experiences, Esther does not seem to like her:

Joan Gilling came from our home town and went to
our church and was a year ahead of me at college.

She was a big wheel—president of her class and a physics major and the college hockey champion. She always made me feel squirmy with her starey pebble-coloured eyes and her gleaming tombstone teeth and her breathy voice. She was big as a horse, too. I began to think Buddy had pretty poor taste. (Plath, 1963, p. 61)

Esther has a close affinity with Joan, but she has a negative impression about her. Additionally, she considers Joan as her black side. She says:

Her thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own.

Sometimes, I wondered if I had made Joan up. Other times I wondered if she would continue to pop in at every crisis of my life to remind me of what I had been, and what I had been through, and carry on her own separate but similar crisis under my nose. (Plath, 1963, p. 231)

Since Joan is viewed as Esther's dark side, her suicide at the end of the novel and Esther's decision to attend the funeral indicate the downfall of the affinity between her and her dark part. Such a fact reinforces her recovery, rebirth, and freedom. Esther further says: "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream" (Plath, 1963, p. 250). In this retrospective thought, she consciously displays her separation from the stifling bell jar.

Moreover, it is no wonder that Esther throws the roses brought to her by her mother for her birthday in the waste-basket since she detests her biological birth and longs for a second birth after leaving the private hospital under the care of Dr. Nolan. The birth scene is clearly drawn in the final lines of the novel:

There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice—patched, retreated and approved for the road. I was trying to think of an appropriate one when Doctor Nolan appeared from nowhere and touched me on the shoulder.

"All right, Esther."

I rose and followed her to the open door (Plath, 1963, p. 257).

Thus, the new open door that allows Esther to breathe after being suffocated

under the doorless bell jar is a positive and triumphant image. Esther's identity is forged. Her desire for rebirth and life becomes obvious: "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am" (Plath, 1963, p. 256). Indeed, her identity and existence are asserted through the recurring beat of her heart, which emphasizes the protagonist's powerful rebirth.

In addition, in the final scene, Esther appears wearing a red suit, which is "flamboyant as my [her] plans" (Plath, 1963, p. 257), foreshadowing her future goals. She is ready to enter the room where the doctors wait for her to attend her release interview. Esther explains: "The eyes and the faces all turned themselves towards me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room" (Plath, 1963, p. 258). This scene indicates the protagonist's rebirth. The magical thread is "analogous to an umbilical cord, but in this case it seems to be her own volition and self-command that allow her to step into the room, symbolically taking the responsibility and credit for her own rebirth" (Coyle, 1984, p. 173). Dressed in an emblematic bloody colour, Esther attracts the doctors' attention and feels guided by their help in a new world, just like a baby. The achievement of an authentic self is now possible for her. Indeed, the end of the novel is marked by the feeling of peace, hope, rebirth, and freedom.

Furthermore, the line between autobiography and fiction has often been blurred. There are many common points between Sylvia Plath and Esther Greenwood, her protagonist, since *The Bell Jar* is an autobiographical novel. In fact, Esther Greenwood mirrors Sylvia Plath. One of the most important similarities between them is that Sylvia Plath, like Esther, was from Boston. Moreover, Greenwood refers to the last name of Plath's own grandmother. In addition, like her heroine, she lost her father at a young age, and she was raised by her mother. Likewise, in 1953, the ambitious and talented Plath won an internship on a famous New York magazine, "Mademoiselle," and she failed to have a creative writing course. Another similar event, which is accurately depicted in the novel, is when Plath broke her leg when she went skiing. Similarly, after suffering from depression and mental instability, she underwent a mental breakdown. However, unlike Esther, who attempts suicide, Plath ultimately committed suicide one month after the publication of *The Bell Jar*, at the age of thirty-one by gas suffocation from her kitchen oven, leaving her children, because of the social demands and her distrust for the confining world.

Finally, in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, the protagonist Esther Greenwood, in the process of striving to find her own identity in a sexist society, develops a mental disorder, which helps her discover her true self.

This novel focuses on the madness of the outer world and the inner world of madness. Indeed, madness is a form of rebellion against women's oppression in male-dominated societies. It is also about being true to one's self in spite of the domination of the disappointing social demands. The novel is often considered as a suicide note from Plath.

Conclusion

Women encounter many obstacles and pressures in their lives because of the imposed social restrictions, which often lead to insanity and suicide. In *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath skillfully depicts her young protagonist's coming of age, ambition, and struggle in the oppressive atmosphere of the 1950s male-dominated American society. Esther, like Plath, attempts to pursue her career as a writer, but she faces the rigid social constraints. In fact, making a choice between motherhood and a successful career constitutes an important female issue.

Hence, Esther's dissatisfaction with the limited choices of her society triggers her mental breakdown and suicide attempts. Actually, the novel symbolizes not only Esther's insanity but also society's madness that oppressively places women in a suffocating 'belle' jar made of unfair norms. Likewise, Esther's bad experiences with men, the exploiters, denote their negative impact on women as being part of the socially imposed system. Esther's experiences also reflect Plath's life at the level of many incidents, such as the complicated relations with men and scholarship winning. In general, the novel sheds light on 20th century American women's limiting life conditions.

Since the novel's theme and structure are still relevant in today's societies, *The Bell Jar* remains an important and powerful literary work that is still enthusiastically read. Moreover, the character of Esther reflects Plath's own frustration and fragmentation and lives similar experiences and incidents as the novel is autobiographical. In brief, Esther's rejection of Buddy and Irwin at the end of the novel and her final recovery and rebirth foreshadow her triumph over male oppression and her ability to achieve self-control and free choice. In brief, the aim of this paper is to reveal that madness can be redefined as a positive phenomenon, which leads to an ultimate rebirth.

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