

Existentialism in the Postwar American Novel: A Feminist Existential Study of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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Abstract:

*This paper examines existentialism in the postwar American novel, and then critically analyzes Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* using a feminist existentialist approach. The paper moves from existentialism in the 1960s literature, in general, to give context to the novel and feminist existentialism in specific. The paper delves into the intersection of existentialism and feminism in the novel due to the presence of themes of existential angst and the struggles of living in the postwar American patriarchal society.*

Keywords: *Existentialism; Feminist existentialism; Post-war American novel; The Bell Jar; Sylvia Path.*

1. Introduction

The postwar period in American literature was marked by a profound sense of disillusionment and existential questioning, as writers grappled with the aftermath of World War II and the shifting societal norms of the time. Sylvia Plath's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, published in 1963, stands as a poignant exploration of existential angst and the struggles of a young woman navigating the expectations imposed upon her by a patriarchal society.

Existential themes permeated the literary landscape of postwar America, as writers sought to make sense of the human condition and the absurdities of modern

life. One of the most influential studies on the influence of existentialism on postwar American literature is "The American Existential Novel" by Terry Comito (1970). Comito examines the works of authors such as Norman Mailer, Ralph Ellison, and Saul Bellow, arguing that these writers were profoundly shaped by the existential philosophy of thinkers like Camus, Sartre, and Kierkegaard. He contends that the existential novel in America emerged as a response to the disillusionment and loss of meaning that followed World War II, offering a literary vehicle for exploring the human condition in a world devoid of traditional certainties. (Comito, 1970)

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In "Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* as an Existential Novel" (1982), Linda Wagner-Martin analyzes Plath's novel through the lens of existentialism, highlighting the protagonist Esther Greenwood's struggle with identity, alienation, and the absurdities of modern life. Wagner-Martin argues that Esther's experiences mirror the existential dilemmas explored by philosophers like Camus and Sartre, as she grapples with the meaninglessness of her existence and the oppressive societal expectations imposed upon her as a woman (Wagner-Martin, 1982).

The intersection of existentialism and feminism is a critical aspect of *The Bell Jar*, as Plath's novel explores the unique challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society. In "Feminist Existentialism in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*" (1998), Kathleen Lant examines how Plath's work engages with the ideas of feminist existentialists like Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan. Lant contends that Esther's existential crisis is inextricably linked to her struggles against the confines of traditional gender roles and societal expectations, highlighting the novel's profound contribution to the discourse on feminist existentialism (Lant, 1998).

This paper employs an existentialist philosophical framework to examine the postwar American novel and uses it as a contextual foundation to analyze Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* from the perspective of existentialist feminist thought and critique. Existentialism is a philosophy that influenced American novelists to adopt new themes in

constructing their fictional characters like the human condition and existential angst.

2. The Post-war American Society

The 1950s American society was family-oriented, conservative, and very conforming. Historians would often describe this decade as happy times considering that the years of war had ended, the economy was at a more stable stage, and more families were financially comfortable to move to the suburbs which led to the boom of the suburbs and eventually to the baby boom. The growing popularity of television helped in the spread of a popular culture that preached certain values and lifestyles and portrayed the image of the ideal American. Although the 1950s are conventionally known as the conservative decade, many famous television shows do not fall under the category of family-friendly, such as Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell who became iconic figures in the United States. Therefore, we can argue that popular culture preached family values and conservatism; however, the decade also pushed the boundaries for the upcoming 1960s radical culture.

The 1950s were called the bourgeois decade because the white American middle-class society knew nothing about African-American citizens and other minority communities, and women's issues were not often discussed. Instead, they are more focused on conforming to what constitutes the ideal American. The popular culture reinforced gender roles, the superiority of the white race over other races, and conformity in every aspect of life leaving no room for individuality. The rigid conformity gave rise

to a generation that puts everything under question and is interested more in individuality.

By the turn of the decade, more objections had risen, and changes were in demand. The 1960s was the best representation of the start of a counter-culture. What was deemed as a counterculture became the main culture that defined those times. In a time when everybody is encouraged to be the same, being different captured the unique spirit of the 1960s. The next decades to come were the times of fast changes. During the wartime years, men had to join the army forces, and women had to go to work to provide for themselves and their families. After the world wars, women were expected to return to their respective roles at home doing chores, bearing babies, and taking care of the household. This expectation was like a sentence to a futile existence that does not see beyond the walls of one's own house. After having a little sense of independence and seeing the capabilities a woman can have in the workforce, it was hard to go back to pretending that work outside of the home is exclusively a male's job. Women enjoyed transcending the walls of their homes and were enlightened that they did not have to depend on a male figure to provide for themselves. Gender roles have long been embedded in the consciousness of society, and we often confuse it with the line between being a good or bad person. The portrayal of the woman as a gentle and powerless creature was outdated and displeased many women who were dissatisfied with the status quo. The 1960s was a prominent decade for the feminist movement. The unfairness of gender roles

imposed by society evoked a thirst for change that gave birth to second-wave feminism. The 1960s feminism called out the injustices women face on a day-to-day basis, and society's perspective on 'American' values has been put into question. According to Sartre "Civilization is the reflection on a shared situation. In Italy, in France, in Benelux, in Sweden, in Norway, in Germany, in Greece, in Austria, everywhere we find the same problems and the same dangers". (Bondy, 1967, p. 27) Unity in facing political problems in a country is key to the survival of a civilization.

The 1960s witnessed the birth of the second wave of feminism, the civil rights movement for African Americans, the assassination of J.F. Kennedy, and the Red Scare. The rising fear of a potential world war and the lingering war traumas, the loss of faith in traditions, and the pursuit of existential questions gave rise to generations that believed in individualism, alienation, and freedom.

3. Existentialist Influence on the American Novel

American literature was exposed to existentialism when the French philosophers, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, popularized the movement. The two are primarily philosophers; however, they are also novelists. Their primary aim is to represent the lived experience with all its complexity. They wanted to articulate life into written words because "only in the novel is it possible to evoke the primordial gushing-forth of life in all its concrete particular and temporal verity"(Beauvoir 2015 as cited in Bruneau

1948, p. 66). For them, imitating life into writing was a means of reflecting and contemplating existence.

Influenced by existentialist philosophy, American novelists moved away from portraying characters with predetermined essences or identities. Instead, they presented protagonists grappling with ambiguity, facing existential crises, and being forced to create meaning amid the absurdities of life. The struggle to define oneself authentically, despite societal pressures towards conformity or inauthenticity 'bad faith' (Sartre, 2007), became a central conflict.

Literature reflects not only society in general but also represents the anguish that emerges from the human condition as individuals in a society. The postwar American novel does not only tell a story with sequenced events; it portrays the inner thoughts accompanied by the actions and events. Literature reflects the situation lived more vividly when life is imitated with all its angst, confusion, and complexity. Literary texts are not only for the elite; however, it is for every person who is open to seeing the world through the lenses of different characters and to see how they deal with the anguish of existing. The 1960s American novel reflected the struggle between individual freedom, experience, and existential angst; and society's conformity and expectations. The pressure of conformity was not only an outer struggle but an inner struggle also. The personal desire to fit in and impress was in itself a struggle and constraint for people who want to deviate from conformity.

Postwar American literature is considered modernist and postmodernist literature for

the consistent themes of alienation, radical break with traditions, and the portrayal of the modern and postmodern world. Naturalism and Realism, which is what came before postwar American literature, are literary movements with an emphasis on reality, and their focus is the recount of an already oriented and fated life. The novelist directs characters in a logical and inescapable life. In this case, the novelist is recounting a lived life rather than a living life (Bruneau, 1948, p. 67). By recounting a lived life, the novelist acts as an omnipotent director of events that recounts a story in an automatic way with a simple, predictable, and sequenced storyline. However, existentialists believe in the complexity of life, and the unpredictability of men. Life does not happen in a sequenced matter, and people are leading different lives at the same time and carry complex emotions and thoughts. For existentialist writers, a novelist must not overlook the angst of the lived experience. "A character in a novel must vibrate with the same anxieties and 'anguish' as the 'man-in-the-world', must be, in the present tense, and not have been, in the past." (Bruneau, 1948, p. 67) Man-in-the-world or being-in-the-world, as it is sometimes translated from the German *In-der-Welt-sein*, is a term coined by Martin Heidegger to refer to humans being immersed in a world of meanings and experiences rather than detached, isolated subjects. The lived experience is interactive with the surroundings and it is often unpredictable. If a novelist is to imitate life, they should not overlook the freedom of men's actions that lead to the unpredictability of their choices and the complexity of life.

The premise of existentialism as a movement is that there is no predetermined fate and that humans are crucially free to direct their lives. We are crucially free, and that total freedom induces anxiety. We lead lives not by predetermined paths but by design of our own choices. Although, it may seem that existentialism promotes atheism; however, existentialists are varied from atheists and believers. In fact, existentialism does not delve into religion at all; it concerns itself with the essence of human existence and believes that choices determine and carve someone's life, which is contrary to the philosophical standpoint of classic philosophers such as Plato and Socrates who believed in a predetermined fate. Existentialism concerns itself with the human condition, its anguish, and complexity; and existential literature tries to reflect that complexity into words.

With the rise of technology and fast-paced life, individuals are rushed to accomplish goals, have meaning for their lives, and have an ongoing pursuit for success. The angst stems from knowing we are the ones in control of our lives and wanting to lead a fulfilling productive life, and the pressure to live up to society's expectations; however, according to Existentialism, meaning in the world does not exist. Instead, we create our own sense of meaning. Due to the reason that we are crucially free, and we possess the responsibility for our own lives, angst is inevitable and is part of the human condition.

The modern times are described as generations that love to be sad. The newer the generation is the more open-minded they are, the more contradictory they are to the thinking of older generations, and the

more depressed and isolated they are. A bildungsroman with a teenage protagonist despising their current society, feeling isolated, and being the outcast is the typical novel in American popular culture, or as it seems. These kinds of novels would criticize the unfairness of society and would promote individualism. That said, American novels were not sad or pessimistic per se. However, coming-of-age novels put forward a lot of existential questions about the world, and about the human condition. It focuses on the lonesome of individuals in modern times, which can come off as pessimistic and sad.

4. Feminist Existentialism

Existentialism as a philosophy argues about the human condition grappling with abstract concepts like freedom, choice, and the creation of meaning, and it often fails to directly engage with the particularities of women's lived experiences. Feminist existentialism, by contrast, applies existentialist ideas and inquiries to the concrete realities faced by women as an oppressed class. Simone de Beauvoir, who was a French feminist and an existentialist, was the first to put women in the picture in existential philosophy. Just like men, women face existential questions, crises, and angst. The more an individual advances in life, the more they ask questions. "I know that I know nothing" is Socrates' famous saying that is still a valid description of the state of every human. After all, we are humans thrown into a world of wonders and mysteries. The more we contemplate existence, the more we feel lost. Feminist existentialism is part of existentialism as a philosophy just like females, with males, are

part of the human race. To talk about the human condition is to talk about humans, males and females equally.

The Second Sex was one of the many prominent feminist texts of the second-wave feminist movement and the very first that marked the birth of feminist existentialism. Beauvoir wrote about the treatment of women throughout history to understand why women are put in a second position in her 1949 book *Le Deuxieme Sexe* which has been translated later to multiple languages among which the English language as *The Second Sex*. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." (De Beauvoir, 2015, p. 330) is a popular sentence that encapsulates the central idea of Beauvoir's *Second Sex* which started the discussion of the essence of being a woman. The kind of person a woman becomes and the role that she presents in her society is neither a biological, psychological nor an economic fate to fit in a certain role. The civilization and culture of the time created a mediocre version of males and called it feminine. It is not in the nature of humans to be inferior to other humans. It is only the intervention of people's perspectives that creates this image of an inferior other. (De Beauvoir, 2015) De Beauvoir tries to pin down the reason why we define a woman on the weaker end of the binary. As a feminist figure, Beauvoir introduced the idea that 'woman' is a socially constructed term that describes a second citizen or an 'Other' compared to her male counterpart. The term would refer to a housekeeper, a caregiver, a mother, or a wife, and the term would not find a definition that transcends the limits of one's home. Woman is a social construct because it is an ideal of a

submissive person who has a life already assigned to her since birth. Having a predefined path in life and no space for self-expression is what leads women to, what Beauvoir calls, "the no-name problem". All her energy must be drained into her home. An existential crisis arises when one feels dissatisfied with one's life and cannot quite pin down what is the problem other than being dissatisfied. (De Beauvoir, 2015).

Indeed, biology permits the role of a mother; however, it does not prohibit a woman from being a mother and other things at the same time or being other things than a mother. There is nothing wrong with being feminine, the problem is with defining femininity as a shot box definition with limiting roles, which constricts women's ambitions. (Ibid)

According to De Beauvoir, Man has always seen himself as the subject, the essential, the Self and conceived of woman as the other. This is a result of a continuous subordination of the feminine throughout history. Unlike the oppression of race or class, the female sex's oppression has no event that demarks its start; instead, the oppression is in the form of a continuous flood of ideas that made up society's expectations and internalized the idea of the Other in women too. (De Beauvoir, 2015) Her theory lines up with the theory of learned helplessness. The theory is a mindset acquired through experiencing recurring negative situations that seem uncontrollable. Even if opportunities to change their situation eventually arise, requiring only modest effort on their part, they fail to recognize their own agency and capability to improve their conditions, resigning themselves to the undesirable

status quo despite having the means to exert influence over their circumstances. Women learn helplessness because they are constantly judged and surveilled from a young age. "Surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action" (Foucault, 1979, p. 201). For women, to fit in society, they seek to be validated through complying with gender roles and predetermined life choices. Helplessness is internalized in the subconscious of women which is what we can compare to Jean-Paul Sartre's "Bad Faith". To adhere to bad faith is to have self-deception or inauthenticity where one denies their freedom and responsibility. (Sartre, 2007) From a feminist existentialist perspective, being a woman is not a shot box definition. A woman is a female who takes up the responsibility of her own freedom and meaning in life, they can authentically construct their own values and self-conceptions outside of patriarchal essentialisms. In a society that views women as a commodity that adds up to a man's life; women should be viewed as a separate entity that does not seek validation to be valued. A woman is not created to satisfy and complete a man's life; however, women and men are created to complement each other's lives and be respected mutually.

5. Existential Angst in *The Bell Jar*

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines angst as "A feeling of dread, anxiety, or anguish". According to existentialist philosophers, existential angst is a fundamental aspect of the human condition, arising from the individual's confrontation with freedom, responsibility,

and the awareness of their own mortality. The term gained broader philosophical significance through the works of existentialist thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre in the 19th and 20th centuries.

In her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), Sylvia Plath portrayed what troubled her in her own life. A novel that presents the human condition through the eyes of a depressed young adult who is trying to figure out life. Esther Greenwood, the protagonist, displayed the anguish of living as a young adult woman faced with different choices in the 1950s American society. Esther experiences the absurdity of being both privileged yet fundamentally alienated as a woman, careening between desiring conformity and craving escape from its suffocating confines. She was confused about what to pursue in life and contemplated the choices a woman has, and what society regarded women's roles. As human beings, women's essence is not solely to reproduce and take care of their husbands' needs and nothing more. Esther makes a lot of remarks that show that she is scared of being a mother; "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, 1971, ch. 07)

While she vocally opposed and disavowed the notion of becoming a mother, ironically, she did end up giving birth to a child. She does romanticize the idea of having babies. In fact, she does mention her baby in the first chapter. The novel is told in retrospect; therefore, whenever she talks about her past experiences, she is also talking about

her past feelings and her disillusionment at finding what she wants to do with her life, hence, when she expresses her fear of childbearing that was before having a baby. She had a baby at the end of the story, which can be a hint that she married, but there is not much follow-up to what she is up to after she left the psychiatric ward. Although she strongly refuses the idea of having children, the hint of having a baby in the first chapter indicates that she changed her mind and could have gotten married and carried a career as well, but that is just a prediction. *The Bell Jar* portrays perfectly the unpredictability of human behavior, the complexity of human emotions, and the lived experience of "man-in-the-world". Esther dislikes the idea of bearing children for fear of losing herself in it and becoming the common mother and wife and losing her aspiration to be a writer and so many other things. Despite her fear, she formed a family of her own.

The Bell Jar is a novel that portrays angst that comes from change. Esther does not fear the idea of marriage; however, she fears the change that comes with it. The constrictive nature of being a mother, since it is a devoting job, time, and energy-consuming, meant giving up on other dreams. Furthermore, her first suicide attempt was at the end of her internship in the Ladies' Day magazine, and after her rejection from a writing program, she was looking forward to doing it. Esther is afraid of not being in control of her future. She fears the unknown.

Esther's existential angst stems from the fear of change and the fear of stagnation at the same time. She hesitates between having or not having a husband and children,

pursuing a career or not, traveling or staying at home. The more she contemplates her future, the more she finds herself lost and cannot figure out what she wants to do:

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, Ch 07).

Existential angst is a product of being aware of freedom of consciousness. Esther has the freedom to do anything that pleases her; however, she wants to do and be everything. She wants to live and experience different things without losing the opportunity of anything. Freedom is a responsibility that induces existential angst. Esther is crucially free in deciding her life path, and that scares her because she still does not know what she wants. Being conscious about being free to choose whatever she pleases generates anxiety.

6. Conclusion

Existentialism influenced the postwar American society. The French philosophers, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir popularized the philosophy through writing about the human condition and the complexity of human life and emotions.

The 1960s American novel expressed popular themes such as the struggle between individual freedom, experience, and anxiety; and society's conformity and

expectations. Existentialists try to convey the complexity and unpredictability of life and characters in written words. They try to capture the angst of the "man-in-the-world", instead of directing events like an omnipotent storyteller with predefined characters, emotions, and experiences. They try to convey the unpredictability of the human condition.

Feminist existentialism does not contradict existentialism, but instead, tries to focus on feminist issues. While discussing existential questions and the human condition, women should be part of that discussion. De Beauvoir's main argument in *The Second Sex* is that women are cast as the other on every level in life. She explains that, according to the man, a woman is cast in a series of binaries that characterize them as inferiors. Men are the self and the subject; woman is the other and the object. Man is essential, absolute, and independent; on the other hand, she is inessential, incomplete, and dependent. We can see that the feminine is so encrypted in our minds, conscious and unconscious that it comes in a second position and that is but a social construct. The life of a female is outlined and what they can do and cannot do is already conventionally set by their surroundings which constrains their freedom and bounds them in bad faith. It is her main purpose in life to take care of others. Moreover, the no-name problem is the frustration that comes from the boundaries set for women, and the countless things women can do, but are bound not to do because of what society and the surroundings impose as proper.

Being a mother and a wife is a choice the woman makes, rather than a God-given

imposition that every girl has to endure. Similarly to Sartre, Beauvoir sees the body not as an object but as a situation, a context that reflects meaning only in relation to society. How we define things is how we see them and see their importance, and the feminine is framed in one pejorative image. All females are reduced to one definition of a woman; the inferior other has the role of a caregiver who sacrifices all her time to be a wife, mother, and nothing much beyond that. There is nothing wrong with being a diligent mother; however, women can be other things besides being mothers and achieve greater things if they are not always constrained by the socially constructed definition of woman. American literature portrayed this dissatisfaction with feminist literary works among which *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath.

The Bell Jar is a novel that portrays existential angst through the lived experience of Esther Greenwood. She contemplates going the traditional route and founding a family, focusing on a career, or abandoning the idea of marriage and traveling around the world. In fact, she had more ideas. The overwhelming flow of ideas is her realization that she is free to initiate any actions, and her freedom is causing her anxiety. She is not afraid of missing out by choosing one thing. Her anxiety stems from her freedom. The novel portrayed well the complexity of human emotions and thoughts.

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