

# A Gendered Approach to Ontological Insecurity and Alienation in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

Shyaonti Talwar

Assistant Professor of English, Gokhale Education Society's RNC Arts JDB Commerce and NSC Science College, Nashik, Maharashtra, India; shyantalwar2@gmail.com

## Abstract

Many scholars and critics regard *The Bell Jar* more as an autobiographical work than as a fictive piece. But *The Bell Jar* is much more than that. *The Bell Jar* depicts an artist's suffering. It is a book that needs to be suffered and felt in order to understand first hand, the degree and intensity of suffering, a creative and a sensitive mind undergoes – a mind that is lucid and acutely and painfully conscious of its being and the implications of 'being' as a continually painful and traumatic action in progress. This paper analyses how the novel presents the American woman's boundary situation which forces her to live the feminine mystique and doesn't allow her a subjective expression or any individuality.

**Keywords:** Feminine Mystique, Heteronormative, Institutionalisation, Ontological, Sisyphean

## 1. Introduction

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* which was published only posthumously created a furore in the literary world because of the unnerving candour of the novel which almost read like an autobiography and seemed to give unhindered access to the writer's emotionally disturbed and ontologically conflicted state manifested in the protagonist. The story is of Esther Greenwood, a small town girl with a literary bent of mind who wants to make a name for herself in the world of writing. The mental preoccupations of Esther however are far from what is prescribed for or expected of women of her age and times. In her, one sees a search for the purpose of the self, a mind plagued by 'Why am I?' rather than 'Who am I?' which she is unable to pursue and find out because she is so walled in by circumstances. Her deep existential anguish and her attempt to construct a self that is authentic can be seen in her non-normative behaviour which is visible from the outset and becomes explicit as the narrative progresses

in her growing apathy towards life and existence, in her disillusionment of institutions like marriage and family and in her repeated attempts to end her life finally culminating in a suicide attempt when she almost succeeds in ending her life, forcing her mother to seek professional psychiatric counsel. *The Bell Jar* thus stands to be a social and psychological critique of the times when women were policed and the slightest deviation from the established norm in their behaviour was not tolerated and led to their immediate institutionalisation.

## 2. Non-normative Behaviour

Esther is not normal as per prescriptive societal standards. She has a brilliant academic track record, studies too hard, plans for a serious career ahead instead of a secretary's job (as was the expected career trajectory for women in the America of the post-World Wars) and a house to manage, is uninterested in fashion, enjoys food and more or less keeps to herself. She is a cynic, needs intellectual

compatibility if she is bonding with someone, obsesses over death and is oversensitive. Early on in the narrative Esther lives the trauma of being electrocuted, as if she were the one undergoing it or the one who had a close brush with it:

I kept hearing about the Rosenbergs over the radio and at the office till I couldn't get them out of my mind. It was like the first time I saw a cadaver. For weeks afterwards the cadaver's head – or what there was left of it – floated up behind my eggs and bacon and behind the face of Buddy Willard who was responsible for my seeing it in the first place and pretty soon I felt as though I were carrying that cadaver's head around with me on a string, like some black, noseless balloon stinking of vinegar<sup>1</sup>.

Her interest in men too does not reflect the usual kind of heteronormative or heterosexual interest or attraction. She confesses she 'collects' men with unusual names. From her accounts, one infers that she is possibly intrigued by men with fascinating names and regards them as specimens. Esther draws inspiration from unconventional behaviour. She recalls the totally inappropriate table manners of a badly dressed poet who she had once met. The confidence that he exuded through his words and actions inspires Esther. She takes a leaf out of his book and starts emulating his ways, especially his table manners which is indicative of her desire to be rebellious and to be a non-conformist.

She displays an overriding nausea for habit and routine and tries to cut loose from all kinds of repetitive tasks and social duties that are a part of the regimen of women. This is manifested in her behaviour as an extreme statement of protest when Esther chooses to go around for days on end without washing or cleaning herself or combing her hair or changing her clothes. This act of hers can be read as a negation of a social self which is ascribed and attributed meaning through a close and constant observation and analysis of the ritualistic actions it engages in.

### 3. A Marginalised Entity

Esther is a woman, a small town girl, who regards herself as awkwardly tall and thin. She isn't as fashion-conscious as the other girls and there is at least one specific instance in the novel right at the start when it is evident that she is overlooked and side-lined by hegemonically masculine, desirable and good-looking men as she is not

conventionally attractive. On the other hand, she can't get along with the other girls in the group because she finds them intellectually inferior and leading contrived lives with a false consciousness.

Esther recounts past incidents where supposedly well-meaning seniors had tried to fix blind dates for her but the kind of men she describes, who came to see her, are aberrations in one way or the other which adds to her sense of alienation and makes her believe that she does not fit into the popular category of the young urban middle-class American woman:

I hated coming downstairs sweaty-handed and curious every Saturday night and having some senior introduce me to her aunt's best friend's son and finding some pale, mushroomy fellow with protruding ears or buck teeth or a bad leg. I didn't think I deserved it...I just studied too hard, I didn't know when to stop<sup>2</sup>.

It is clear from the above statement that intellect in women is regarded as a handicap by a society that prefers smug, domesticated aspiring wives and mothers or at the most secretaries complimenting male bosses.

Esther suffers existential apprehension and ontological nervousness. She has to play along and so she mechanically involves herself in odd tasks like reviewing stories; in rolling the Sisyphian boulder up the hill. The extent of her marginalisation and sense of alienation is poignantly revealed in the instance when she looks out into the darkness from her hotel room in New York and is unable to see anything.

Her subconscious desire to look for an alternate space and confine herself to that space which doesn't overlap with the intimidating world outside is manifested early on in the narrative when she seeks solace within the four walls of her hotel room and even more than that her bed and the bath.

On several other occasions in the novel we find her seeking an alternate space to crawl into - literally and metaphorically. We find her literally crawling into 'the mouth of darkness' in her cellar after consuming nearly fifty sleeping pills to lie nondescript so that she is not discovered too soon and saved. At one point in the narrative she expresses her desire to crawl into the pages of the book and remain there. She also creates the fictional character of Elaine when she decides to write a novel and chooses to take on a pseudonym, "Ellie" when she sets out for an adventure in New York. These are all attempts to

seek an alternate existence where she will be central and not peripheral.

Esther's character has a tramp like, wandering and isolated element about it. She is withdrawn and not close with anyone when she is in New York. Even in college one doesn't get a glimpse of any close bonding in her case. She is not attached to her brother either who is only described but never heard in the narrative. She doesn't feel close to anyone and can also be seen as a little paranoid in letting anyone come close to her.

On the other hand, she feels a strong pull towards some people but fails to express her feelings towards them. She likes Doreen but is aware that she is not as attractive as her. Whenever she is with Doreen, she becomes more conscious and awkward of herself.

Esther is fascinated by people who are unconventional, which is why Doreen, Eric, the poet, all fascinate her. Doreen because she is beauty with sarcasm, Eric because he has an unconventional take on relationships and the poet she is introduced to during her internship, because of his mannerisms. She finds on the other hand, predictable people who beat the trodden path insufferable and boring and has no patience for them. These include all three Willards and also her mother perhaps because she senses a hypocrisy at work in them. She admires people who are honest and have no qualms in unapologetically living the life they have chosen.

#### 4. A Growing Sense of Alienation

Esther feels increasingly alienated because of the things she doesn't have in common with most other women of her generation who have been raised to internalise the importance of a domesticated existence and remain committed to their functional roles of prospective wives and mothers devoted to the well-being of the family. She muses in a purely contemplative state:

I started adding up all the things I couldn't do.  
I began with cooking<sup>3</sup>.

The first inability that is mentioned is the inability to cook, culinary skills largely being part of managing the house and naturally the domain of women. Through this confession Esther very clearly and categorically dissociates herself from the rest of her gender because she does not possess this functional trait which is one of the key defining and determining traits of femininity

which essentialises the purely cultural notion of gender:

I didn't know shorthand either...My list grew longer. I was a terrible dancer. I had no sense of balance and when we had to walk down a narrow board with our hands out and a book on our head in gym class, I always fell over. I couldn't ride a horse, or ski...I couldn't speak German or read Hebrew or write Chinese. I didn't even know where most of the odd out-of-the-way countries the UN men in front of me represented fitted in on the map<sup>4</sup>.

Her list keeps getting longer. She can't dance which implies she doesn't have the poise or grace of a dancer, again conventionally and mandatorily feminine attributes. It extends to other areas too. This chronic complex and sense of inferiority that Esther experiences is triggered by seeing other people in action doing things she can't and possibly never will. She is hit by a sense of inadequacy which adds to her sense of alienation. Consciousness of the being or coming to terms with herself involves a critical self-evaluation. She senses she is not up to it to face the world.

The confession or a verbal admission of the supposed shortcoming of not knowing shorthand again positions her as professionally less equipped than her other female counterparts and not in synch with the demands of her times which expected women to get into menial jobs rather than full time serious careers. It meant that she didn't qualify to bag a secretary's job – again a very feminine occupation. She subverts the norm by stating that she would rather 'dictate' than be dictated to and end up 'serving men' in a way. There is also the indication of the sudden unfamiliarity with which letters strike her senses indicating the arbitrariness of language and the metaphysical distance or gap between the signifier and the signified, the letter or the sound or their combination and what they represent:

...those little shorthand symbols in the book my mother showed me seemed just as bad as let  $t$  equal time and let  $s$  equal the total distance<sup>5</sup>.

Letters in isolation could mean anything to her reminding her of formulae in physics. She is intimidated by the arbitrariness of the letters.

#### 5. Ontological Insecurity

Esther definitely has a sense of being incomplete and seeks to fill the void in her through hero worshipping people

which is evident, first in her crush on Buddy Willard and then her adoration of Doreen.

Doreen looked terrific. She was wearing a strapless white lace dress zipped up over a snug corset affair that curved her in at the middle and bulged her out again spectacularly above and below and her skin had a bronzy polish under the pale dusting-powder. She smelled strong as a whole perfume store<sup>6</sup>.

The company of these people make her feel secure and confident and sure of herself:

Ordinarily, I would have been nervous about my dress and my odd colour, but being with Doreen made me forget my worries. I felt wise and cynical as all hell<sup>7</sup>.

She chooses to give them a different name when she and Doreen go out with the two men instead of going to the party organised by the magazine. It is as if Esther is trying to keep her real self, her real identity out of reach of the men she is with. There is also a definite attempt at masking her identity when she sets out to write a novel and creates Elaine wanting to hide behind a fake name.

For Doreen Esther performs and fulfils a functional role who calls her by the name of "Elly" in Lenny's residence even in his absence. Whether she is Esther or Elly doesn't really make a difference to Doreen as long as the latter is ready to tag along and follow her like a faithful little puppy. She just wants Esther to hang around.

This idolising of other people and seeking fulfilment through them continues even when Esther is institutionalised. She adores Dr. Nolan and trusts her implicitly. Even when Dr. Nolan makes her undergo shock therapy without pre-informing her like she had promised, Esther convinces herself that Dr. Nolan must have perhaps desisted from telling her in advance because she had her best interests in mind and didn't want to worry her unnecessarily. Similarly, she spends hours in the company of Mrs. Norris a patient who does not acknowledge her presence in the least.

Esther feels inadequate, emotionally bereft and therefore contemplates putting an end to her life. She becomes increasingly insecure and unsure of herself when she is turned down for a prestigious programme and starts averting public gaze by avoiding her mother, hiding in her own bedroom and trying to change her voice over the phone when she answers calls.

Deborah Horvitz in her book *Literary Trauma* writes on this predicament which seemed to reflect and depict

the state of thousands of women grappling with the meaning of their existence in a Cold War America.:

...the traumatic "double-bind" entrapping women whose stories are manipulated or repressed. Knowing that if she missteps, she can be sentenced indefinitely to a "lunatic asylum" (at which point she will lose her money, property and children), a privileged woman's daily existence can be a life-and-death struggle to hide her depression and hold onto her sanity<sup>8</sup>.

## 6. Conclusion

*The Bell Jar* depicts an artist's suffering. It is a book that needs to be suffered and felt in order to understand firsthand, the degree and intensity of suffering, a creative and a sensitive mind undergoes – a mind that is lucid and acutely and painfully conscious of its being and the implications of 'being' as a continually painful and traumatic action in progress.

Many scholars and critics regard *The Bell Jar* more as an autobiographical work than as a fictive piece. But *The Bell Jar* is much more than that. It essays the white urban or suburban middle class woman's plight and the ideologies she was forced to internalise that formed the quintessential cold war American culture of the fifties. It presents the American woman's boundary situation which forces her to live the feminine mystique and doesn't allow her a subjective expression or any individuality. If she tries to assert her individuality it is regarded as deviant behaviour disrupting the homogeneity in attitude that contemporary American society was aiming for and she needs to be monitored, policed and herded back to the pen which her lot inhabits.

## 7. References

1. Barnes HE. *Existential Ethics*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press; 1978. Print.
2. Bevilacqua WFarrant, ed. *Fiction by American Women Recent Views*. Port Washington New York: National University Publications Associated Faculty Press; 1983. Print.
3. Chatterjee R, ed. *Existentialism in American Literature*. New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann; 1983. Print.
4. Chesler P. *Women and Madness*. New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc; 1972. Print.

5. Cott NF, ed. *Root of bitterness documents of the social history of American women*. New York: E P Dutton and Co., Inc; 1972. Print.
6. Dhawan RK, ed. *Feminism and American Literature*. Prestige Books; 1996. Print.
7. Friedan B. *The Feminine Mystique*. US: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc; 2001. Print.
8. Horvitz DM. *Literary trauma sadism, memory, and sexual violence in American women's fiction*. Albany: State University of New York Press; 2000. Print.
9. Mbalia DD. *Toni Morrison's developing class consciousness*. Selinsgrove, US: Subsquehanna University Press; 2004. Print.