



ISSN : 2582-8169

“The Bell Jar- A story of Anxiety, Depression and Mental Illness”

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Received : 5th November, 2022;

Revised : 23rd November, 2022

; Accepted : 1st December 2022

Abstract: Sylvia Plath was a twentieth-century American poet and novelist, who is best known for her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* that confirms closely to the events of her own life. It is a vivid combination of her vision and nightmare. It clearly interprets her rejection of certain kinds of femininity as well as the restricted role of women in 1950s America. She has secured a great place among modern writers writing in a new genre. She has employed the stream-of-consciousness technique in the development of the plot and story of her only novel *The Bell Jar*. *The Bell Jar* is a 1963 novel by Sylvia Plath describing the decline of main character Esther into a depressive episode and her stay in a psychiatric ward. Plath herself had recurrent depression and was hospitalized for this. She committed suicide a month after the book's publication. Her own understanding by experience may have helped her to write about depression both accurately and powerfully. The novel places her among the greatest novelists of twentieth-century American fiction.

Keywords: Depression, Suicidal tendency, literature, Mental Illness, Anxiety

I. INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is a normal human experience. Anxiety is characterized by a diffuse, unpleasant, vague sense of apprehension, often accompanied by autonomic symptoms, such as headache, perspiration, palpitations, tightness in the chest

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and mild stomach discomfort. In psychology, a feeling of dread, fear, or apprehension, often with no clear justification. Anxiety differs from true fear in that it is typically the product of subjective, internal emotional states rather than a response to a clear and actual danger. The Bell jar is an image that readers of twentieth-century literature recognize all too well. The suffocating, airless enclosure of conformism

making life hell for an iconic nineteen-year-old girl in the 1950s is on par with Holden Caulfield's carousel. The Bell jar itself as an isolated object is simple enough to characterize – a smothering, stiff, unbreakable case, the captive helplessly enclosed within its glass walls. However, the embedded symbolic meaning is slightly more obscure. Many critics view the bell jar as a symbol of society's stifling constraints and befuddling mixed messages that trap Sylvia Plath's heroine, Esther Greenwood, within its glass dome. However, another often overlooked reality is that the physical, albeit metaphorical, suffocation induced by the bell jar is a direct representation of Esther's mental suffocation by the unavoidable settling of depression upon her psyche, and that this circumstance greatly alters the way in which the entire novel can and should be perceived. Until 1970s no American women writers creating women characters who spoke their minds; we had no parallels to Jane Austen's Elizabeth; no American women were telling their readers what it was like to grow up in this vast and complex culture. If we are to understand the American female, using the idea that women themselves tell us what their lives are like and how they think and feel, we certainly need more fictional characters with more candor and insight and the courage to reveal themselves. It is probably this vacuum in American literature that made *The Bell Jar's* protagonist so popular. Esther Greenwood, is a college girl, a good student, a talented writer, and a fashion

magazine contest winner who is the well-bred oldest child in a typical family with two children, a clever games player, a semi-liberated budding intellectual and a sexually confused late adolescent and finally became a mental patient.

Main Thrust

The Bell Jar tells the story of a young woman's coming-of-age, but it does not follow the usual trajectory of adolescent development into adulthood. Instead of undergoing a progressive education in the ways of the world, culminating in an entrance into adulthood, Esther regresses into madness. Experiences intended to be life-changing in a positive sense—Esther's first time in New York City, her first marriage proposal, her success in college—are upsetting and disorienting to her. Instead of finding new meaning in living, Esther wants to die. As she slowly recovers from her suicide attempt, she aspires simply to survive.

The Bell Jar is set in 1950s America, a time when American society was predominantly shaped by conservative values and patriarchal structures. It was a society that placed particular restraints on women as it expected them to embody traditional ideals of purity and chastity and to aspire to the life of a suburban mother and homemaker rather than pursuing their own careers. Many women, like Esther Greenwood, felt crushed by the expectations 1950s American society placed on them. Their resentment of these pressures was one of the motivating forces that inspired the feminist

movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The voice that Plath eventually created for her only novel is indeed fresh, brazen and colloquial, but also sardonic and bitter, the story of a young woman's psychological disintegration and eventual – provisional – recovery. The tone of *The Bell Jar* is not its problem, but its triumph. *The Bell Jar* is an acidic satire on the madness of 1950s America, exploring the impossibility of living up to the era's contradictory ideals of womanhood. Despite its reputation as the favourite novel of morbidly self-obsessed adolescent girls, it is a much funnier book than many may realise. Among the many ironies surrounding the novel's undeserved reputation for taking itself seriously, one of the sharpest is perhaps the way that it has tended to be dismissed along gender lines, as a book merely for women, or petulant teenagers. But although *The Bell Jar* concerns a young woman's eventual breakdown and suicide attempt, it also tells a story of recovery, redemption, rebirth and starting over. And it examines the social expectations and toxic culture of 1950s America – a culture that makes finding a positive identity as a woman so difficult that its heroine is driven to self-destruction.

Losing any secure sense of herself, Esther Greenwood symbolically tests out a series of possible identities, different selves, through the women she meets; none of them represent her full character, the range of her psyche. As many critics have noted, Plath brings in a series of female doubles, or alter egos, to suggest

possible role models of ideal femininity in the 1950s. In particular, Esther identifies with Doreen, who is described in terms that suggest Marilyn Monroe, and with Betsy, a virginal, wholesome cheerful girl-next-door in the style of Doris Day. A girl in the 1950s could be a virgin or she could be a whore: it was a neo-Victorian era, as evidenced by the crinolines and tiny waists.

Sinking into depression, Esther is sent to a horribly insensitive psychiatrist so that he can help her be myself again (ch. 11), but how can she be herself in a society that curtails her possibilities so violently. Doctor prescribes electric shock therapy, and Esther wonders what terrible thing it was that I had done (ch. 12), as Plath suggests that ambitious young women were punished, electrocuted, lobotomised and forced back into submissiveness, for wanting too much, trying too hard, wanting the double life reserved for men, wanting mutually exclusive things. Esther is crazy, says her society, crazy to want them: and so they will do their best to erase those longings, violently if necessary. Having been hospitalised after a suicide attempt, Esther has an epiphany about the way that conventional femininity was trapping all the women like her. Esther observes a gap between what society says she should experience and what she does experience, and this gap intensifies her madness. Society expects women of Esther's age and station to act cheerful, flexible, and confident, and Esther feels she must repress her

natural gloom, cynicism, and dark humour. She feels she cannot discuss or think about the dark spots in life that plague her- personal failure, suffering, and death. She knows the world of fashion she inhabits in New York should make her feel glamorous and happy, but she finds it filled with poison, drunkenness, and violence. Her relationships with men are supposed to be romantic and meaningful, but they are marked by misunderstanding, distrust, and brutality. Esther almost continuously feels that her reactions are wrong, or that she is the only one to view the world as she does, and eventually she begins to feel a sense of unreality. This sense of unreality grows until it becomes unbearable, and attempted suicide and madness follow.

Conclusion

The bell jar is intended to preserve Esther as an ornament and suffocates her. This implies that her problems are due to the societal pressure but she herself discards the charge and accepts some of the blame for her own problems. This is an important step for Esther, as she assumes responsibility for her own actions even if she is not ready to repair her life. But her conflicts and frustrations are quite real. She has a pessimistic personality. Her encounter with Buddy reflects the dehumanizing aspect of the modern world. She is betrayed by the patriarchal structure of society. This leads her pessimistic approach and she gets alienated and dejected from the rest of the world around her. The Bell Jar is a very powerful and believable description of

depression, which will be recognised by those who have been affected and enlighten those who have not. It also offers some hope that no matter how severe the depression is people can recover.

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