

***The Bell Jar* is a feminist text.**

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Introduction

"Feminism" is a socio-political as well as a cultural movement that provides emphasize to the "text." The "text" here not only refers to the manifesto or the official written documents, but the literary works such as novels and poetries are considered as a part of the text (D'Elia, 2016). The phallogentric world is dominated by the masculine propaganda, here only the language of the literature could provide the women to break all the obstacles. Therefore, in the feminist literary criticism the language of the women is imperative (Fisiak, 2011).

According to the author of the novel *The Bell Jar*, the narrator of the novel has seen the world through the distorted lens of the bell jar (Smith, 2016). The protagonist of the novel, Esther Greenwood lives in the 1950s American society, which is a male-dominated society, and in this male-dominated society she aspires to become a poet.

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Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is regarded as an autobiographical novel by many authors' and critics, and it contains various kinds of autobiographical elements at the same time. The narrator or the protagonist of the novel is a young and an intellectual woman, Esther Greenwood. Esther lives in the 1950s America, and this society is an oppressive, phallogentric, patriarchal society (Kareem, 2016). Plath as well as her protagonist Esther belongs to an age that happiness could only found through biological or sexual enactment. According to many critics, especially according to many recent critics the novel here had depicted the life of the women as an object, which is being displayed on the shelves. The women used to have very limited options in their hands; they can become the secretary, or they can be the "happy housewives." Esther had none of these aspirations or dreams; she wanted to become a poet, and thus the oppressive society forced her to repress her desires and goals, which in turn affected her mental health. The confinement that was created by the 1950

patriarchal society was so oppressive that she could not express herself, intellectually, mentally, physically and even sexually (Fisiak, 2011). Esther, throughout the novel struggles for her voice, for her identity, which is consistently repressed by the phallogocentric; men dominated society.

The story begins with Esther recapitulating her past, and she spoke of the fashion magazine contest, that she won, and she got a chance to live in New York, with eleven other girls. The experience that she had in New York reveals that she is different from the girls of her age and time. She does not want to be a "rich housewife"; she is not attracted to the glamorous world of New York. She also does not feel that she could be a wealthy business woman, therefore, in New York, she is not sure what exactly she wants in her life. She was although, sure of the fact that could not conform to the desire and the desires of the society. Thus, the inner silence in her was slowly making her depressed; she was not at all happy with the life that she was living in New York (Kareem, 2016). Thus, she had said,

"The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my silence" (Plath, 1996)

Esther has her world, and in her world, the ambitions and the goals she had are different from the goals and the ambition of the women of her time. She tries very hard, to fulfill her dreams and goals, she even had this thought in her mind that she would get help from the surroundings. She Although, never receive any help from her surrounding environment (Smith, 2016). The society creates a big brick wall for her, which rather than making her journey as a poet easier, makes it even more challenging. The 1950 American society had certain standards for the young women, but Esther defies those standards. Esther does not try to impress the opposite sex, with her appearance, interests and even with her skill of cooking and sewing. She does not care about, learning shorthand, to get a secretarial job,

although her mother thinks that all the young women of her age should learn shorthand (Smith, 2016).

Esther, unlike the other people of her age, both men, and women, think that the role of the mother is imposed upon a woman. According to her, if a woman is married and have children then she could not be herself, rather the woman confirms to the roles assign to her by the society. Thus, according to Esther, the labour room is a "torturing chamber", and so is the view of women giving birth to children. Her boyfriend Buddy Willard although does not confirm to this fact (Ashley Kress, 2014). According to him, after the woman has given birth to a child she had an entirely different feeling. Thus, while commenting on this, even Esther has said,

“I also remember Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children, I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems anymore. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children, it was like being brainwashed, and afterward, you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state” (Plath, 1996)

According to many critics, Esther believed that women are a natural "nurturer," actually helps the patriarchal world to set double standards, which most of the men in the society follow. Esther could not stand sexual double standard people like Buddy Willard, although she remains a virgin, for most of the part of the novel. The thing that hurts her is the fact that the society accepts the double standard attitude or the behavior of the men, but in the case of women, such a kind of acceptance is not there (LetterPile, 2016). A woman should maintain her virginity before her marriage; men can live two lives, one pure and the other not that much pure. Therefore, when Buddy Willard accept the fact she had a sexual experience with

a waitress, a couple of time that summer, she could not stand that fact. Esther, while recapitulating this experience had said,

“That Jewish man and that nun, although of course, we weren't Jewish or Catholic Unitarian. We had together under our imaginary fig tree, and what we had seen wasn't a bird coming out of an egg but a baby.”

Esther's narration reveals the fact that she was not annoyed of Buddy Willard because she had a relationship with a waitress. She was annoyed because Buddy has represented himself as a hypocrite. He pretends to be the true male figure but actually, he is not pure. The fact somehow freezes Esther deep from inside, she could not stand this hypocrisy and thus she is affected both emotionally and mentally. She could not bear the fact that the women of her time had to follow the norms of the society, which give virginity, so much importance.

“When I was nineteen, pureness was the significant issue. Instead of the world being divided up into Catholics and Protestants or Republicans and Democrats or white men and black men or even men and women, I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn't, and this seemed the only really significant difference between one person and another” (Plath, 1996)

The character of Billy Willard not only supports the double standard nature of the society but each individual, living in the society, is supporting it. Esther's mother too, confirms to it, from whom, Esther received an article, which was titled as, "In Defense of Chastity." Esther commented on this article, and she had said that the whole article, according to her

“...the main point of the article was that a man’s world is different from a woman’s world...and the best man wanted to be pure for their wives, and even if they weren’t...they wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex....” (Plath, 1996)

Esther, unlike her mother and the other women in the society, she rejects the roles that society imposes on her. She does not want to be pure and chaste like them, before marriage, so she had a relationship with Constantin. The experience although, was not very pleasing for Esther, Constantin turns her down. Thus, she felt that she was both undesired and unwanted by the men. The experience she had with Constantin was bad, but the experience she had with Marco, who is “a woman-hater” according to Esther, was worst of all. The man tried to rape her, but she rejects him (Ashley Kress, 2014). According to critics, Esther rejecting Marco can be seen as Esther denying the role and believes that were imposed by the society on the women.

The novel is based on the political scenario of Cold War America, and this particular incident too has its place in the novel. The execution of the Esther Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg and her husband is vividly described in the novel. According to the critics, Plath did not describe it only for the sake of describing the political scenario of America at that time (Bu.digication.com, 2016). According to them, Plath intentionally named her character Esther Greenwood, which resembles the name of Ethel Esther Greenglass Rosenberg. Ethel Rosenberg gained the reputation of a “bad mother”. Esther too could not conform to the roles of the women that were imposed upon them by the society. Ethel Rosenberg was referred as a “bad mother” in the media, and this particular thing reminded Esther of the norms and the rules of the society. She commented on this and had said, “she must conform to the era’s dictates and be a good mother.”

Ethel Rosenberg is a double to Esther Greenwood, but apart from Ethel Rosenberg, there is another double of Esther Greenwood. Elly Higginbottom is another double that is created by Esther herself. Elly is an alternative self, of Esther Rosenberg, Esther, is always repressed by this oppressive patriarchal society. Therefore, Elly represents all those things that Esther can never be in her whole life. Esther is full of uncertainties and conflicts; there is a kind of duality in her nature. The character of Elly represents that duality. Therefore, unlike Esther, Elly's nature is quiet, and she conforms to the conventional norms and rules of the society. Therefore, she has the desire to be married the woman and the mother. The desire, which Esther did not have in her whole life and this particular desire, is there in Elly. Elly is different from Esther because, she is an orphan, where Esther is dictated by the rules and the norms of her mother. Moreover, Elly belongs to Chicago, which Esther described as a country, "where unconventional, mixed-up people would come from," although Elly conforms to the conventional standards of the society. Esther on the other hand belongs to the conventional city of Boston, but the aspirations and the dreams she had are unconventional.

The novel portrays the character of Esther through various doubles, if Elly Higginbottom, is one of them then Joan is another double of Esther. She, like Esther, had always been excellent in academics, she too has a relationship with Buddy Willard and most importantly, she is admitted to the same mental hospital, where Esther is a patient. She, although, is different from Esther because she committed suicide and chose death, not life. Esther in Joan's funeral could hear her heart beating and through those heartbeats, she could hear only these words; "I am I am I am." Therefore, Esther chose life and discard death; she wishes to stay alive and to continue with her fight against the oppressive society.

Conclusion

Plath reflected her life and the 1950s American culture to the readers. It is oppressive and frustrating for the women. It does not allow a woman to become an author or a poet, as the society considers such a profession is irrational for the women in the society. Therefore, madness has so much of emphasis in the whole novel. Therefore, Plath's *The Bell Jar* is a feminist text because it talks about the socio-political as well as oppression that is there for the women intellectuals in the society.

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