

24.0 The Madwoman Writes Back: Sylvia Plath's Poetics and Politics in The Bell Jar

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Abstract

The present paper follows a close reading of The Bell Jar to establish how Sylvia Plath creates a 'language of her own' to express her unique experience of womanhood coupled with mental illness in the post-World War II American landscape. Plath's personal memoir inevitably becomes a political narrative as it establishes the relationship between patriarchy and psychiatry. Focussing on the centrality of Plath's unique literary and narrative strategies, the research establishes Plath's rejection of both patriarchal ideologies and patriarchal language. Further, the research explores the problematic relationship between the societal construction of gender roles and madness as illustrated by Plath through her experiences. The paper aims to ascertain the role of life writing as an agent of social critique and social change.

Keywords: Life Writing, Women's Writing, Madness Narratives, Anti-Psychiatry Feminism, Sylvia Plath Studies..

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, through its protagonist's descent into madness and eventual recovery, provides commentary on the hetero-patriarchal impositions on women against the backdrop of post-World War II American society. The text is based largely on Plath's own experiences with mental illness and subsequent institutionalisation. Plath's account establishes the relationship between gender and madness through the genre of life writing. Plath illustrates how both the rejection as well as compliance with patriarchal norms pushes women to the brink of madness and further represents female madness simultaneously as a result of and a revolt against heteropatriarchal ideologies and language.

The present study emphasises on the centrality of situating the text in the larger genre of life writing to locate its resistant potential against patriarchal oppression. Plath in her *Journals*¹ acknowledged how the novel was meant to show a person's state of mind as they struggle with mental health "What I've done is throw together events from my own life, fictionalizing to add colour...I think it will show how isolated a person feels when they are suffering from a breakdown...I've tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar." Though the novel is the fictionalisation of Plath's personal life, it still uncovers important truths about society's treatment of women and madness as it stems from her personal experiences of structural oppression as a woman and as a patient of mental illness.

¹ The quotation has been retrieved from *Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* published posthumously by Plath's husband Ted Hughes.

Medical Historian Roy Porter, in *Madness: A Brief History* (2002) emphasizes the importance of writing medical history from the patient's perspective, whom he calls the "sufferers" at the hands of the institution of medicine. Porter calls physician-centred accounts "a major historical distortion" and further highlights how specifically the field of psychiatry tends to disregard the voices of its patients.

The silencing of the patients' voices is reflective of the unjust power dynamics between the doctors and their patients- an idea which is explored in Michel Foucault's seminal text *Madness and Civilization* (1961). Foucault studies madness and power relations, asserting that far from being a benevolent institution, the psychiatric infrastructure serves as an agent of social control. Foucault argues how mental asylums were corrective facilities for those disrupting the capitalist set-up. Further in *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), he rejects the notion of an objective history and rather encourages uncovering of alternative and disturbed histories from the margins. Foucault's critique however fails to consider the gendered power dynamics at play within the discourse of madness or history. The present paper will argue how Plath's writing encapsulates her personal experience with the psychiatric institution and substantiates both Porter's and Foucault's claims of the need for alternate histories and exposing the power hierarchies in the field. Plath furthers their arguments by incorporating the dimension of gender along with madness.

The idea of madness has always had gendered connotations attached to it dating as back as 1900BC when the word 'Hysteria' was derived from the Greek word 'Hysteron' meaning 'womb.' Psychologist Phyllis Chesler in her book *Women and Madness* (1972), established the relationship between madness and gender, asserting, "What we consider 'madness,' whether it appears in women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role, or the total or partial rejection of one's sex role stereotype." Chesler further argues how women are adversely impacted due to the dominance of men in the fields of psychology and psychiatry, (as illustrated through the character of Dr Gordon in *The Bell Jar*.)

Elaine Showalter presents a gendered analysis and feminist critique of the history of madness in *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (1987). Showalter exposes the double-edged sword that women grapple with in terms of questions of sanity and insanity. On one hand, madness is a female malady since traditional feminine behaviours do not adhere to the definition of mental wellness which is modelled on masculine attributes; and secondly, women transgressing traditional gender norms are also labelled mad in a system that privileges a heteronormative gender ideology, a dilemma central to Esther's character.

Helen Cixous in her essay "The Laugh of Medusa" (1975) notes the relationship between women's language and women's bodies both of which have been controlled by men, she encourages women to reclaim the same through the act of writing. She further argues how language is inherently patriarchal and women must therefore divert towards a new mode of feminine writing or the "écriture féminine." Cixous' argument is central to this research, as the paper builds on how Plath uses the literary medium to express her experience as a woman and as a patient of mental illness. Plath develops a unique literary strategy to voice her

struggles as a woman with mental illness, a vocabulary which had not existed before in the patriarchal language.

Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) critiques the idea that women were naturally meant to seek fulfilment in traditional gender roles. She notes how post the Second World War the educated and once liberated women in America were forced back into the private sphere. She further links this dissatisfaction among women with the growing amount women needing psychiatric help. She therefore connects the enforcement of gender roles upon women with their mental deterioration. Friedan's work contextualises the dilemma faced by Plath's protagonist as a young woman in 1960s America. Friedan's analysis becomes quintessential to understanding the sociological factors contributing to Esther's identity crisis.

In the domain of Sylvia Plath studies, research has focussed on her as a feminist icon, her literary genius, and her struggle with mental illness. The present paper builds on the existing scholarship by establishing a relationship between Plath's poetics and her politics. Virginia Woolf emphasises the necessity of women having a 'room of their own,' (Woolf 4) the present thesis, through a reading of Plath's *The Bell Jar*, argues how women also need a 'language of their own' because they cannot reject patriarchal ideologies using the same patriarchal language. This paper aims to establish how Plath invents an alternative language through her metaphors, dialogues, references, and imageries to uncover alternate histories.

Esther, a writer, and student of literature, loses control over language as she begins to descend into sickness. "Words, dimly familiar but twisted all awry, like faces in a funhouse mirror, fled past, leaving no impression on the glassy surface of my brain" (Plath 157). Her descent into madness results in her inability to express herself coherently, Plath here demonstrates a probable reason for Porter's argument about the lack of patients' narratives in the discourse of psychiatry. She illustrates how language itself is a privilege of the oppressors both in terms of gender and medicine and highlights how the dominant discourses have the power to silence the already marginalised. Plath nevertheless overcomes this obstacle by creating new vocabularies to depict her experiences under a patriarchal regime in *The Bell Jar*. The intricacies weaved into subtle references, imageries, and metaphors from the first line to the ending paragraph express Plath's resistance against patriarchy and psychiatry and the inevitable relationship between the two.

"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 made me sick" (Plath 1) The opening line of *The Bell Jar* is a reference to Ethel and Julius Rosenberg who allegedly spied for the Soviet Union, even though their guilt could not be proven they were electrocuted after a dubious trial. This instance foreshadows Esther's own experience with electroshock therapy for her betrayal of American ideals of femininity. Since Ethel Rosenberg's full name was Ethel Esther Greengrass Rosenberg (Pilat 445), Esther can also be read as her double in the text. Esther "hate[d] the idea of serving men in any way" and "want[ed] to dictate [her] own thrilling letters" (Plath 93). Esther's refusal to comply with these gender roles made her a traitor to her country just like the Rosenbergs, and therefore, she faced similar treatment through the psychiatric institutions. The mental

asylum's role as an agent of social control as argued by Foucault is therein demonstrated by Plath in the very first line of her narrative.

The notion that women are responsible for their own madness by choosing to defy traditional norms of gender roles is represented through the character of Dr. Gordon. He places the onus of Esther's mental health condition on her by asking her "You try and tell me what you think is wrong" (Plath 163). Esther resists this idea by arguing "What did I *think* was wrong? That made it sound as if nothing was *really wrong*, I only *thought* it was wrong" (Plath 164). A further implication of Dr. Gordon's remarks is that he has already decided what is wrong with Esther- her defiance of gender roles, which he wishes her to acknowledge. Doctor Gordon also attempts to convince Esther to shock therapies for the sake of 'improvement,' "A few more shock treatments, Mrs. Greenwood, [...] and I think you'll notice a wonderful improvement" (Plath 183). It is necessary to question the idea of improvement here, whether it means to relieve Esther or benefit the doctors and largely society by diminishing her disruptive symptoms. Plath illustrates Chesler's thesis on the issue of the dominance of male doctors in a field with more female patients through Esther's conversations with Doctor Gordon. She highlights the unjust power dynamics of how madness is diagnosed largely in women yet it is defined by men.

The entrapment one faces due to their experiences with mental illness is further demonstrated through the recurrent imagery of the bell jar in the text. The purpose of a bell jar in scientific experiments is to create a vacuum, in the text, it can be read as a metaphor for psychiatric facilities which shut off the disruptive elements from the outside world; again, substantiating Foucault's argument of mental asylums as instruments to cleanse the society by shutting out people who do not further capitalist agendas; Esther says "The more hopeless you were, the further away they hid you" (Plath 203). Esther, in refusing conventional ideas of motherhood and marriage, becomes one such disruptive element whom the society locks away under the pretext of madness for not fulfilling her assigned gender roles.

Apart from the scientific tool, a domestic bell jar is used to display objects, inviting a gaze from the outside world. This bell jar in Esther's case refers to the patriarchal gaze on her which objectifies her as a woman. Esther seeks to escape this imposition of serving the male gaze and feels suffocated by it just like by the bell jar.

The bell jar imagery could also signify a panoptic experience by the patients in mental asylums who attempt to adhere to the conventional norms of society to get out, again, establishing the role of the facility as a corrective measure instead of a healing institution through the bell jar metaphor. Gayle Whittier sums up the dichotomy of the bell jar imagery in her argument that "The Bell Jar's title implies a subject who is a specimen, someone at once utterly exposed and finally enclosed by the same glass wall." The bell jar acts as a metaphor for the patriarchal impositions on women while also illustrating the suffocating nature of Esther's mental state.

The root of Esther's identity crisis stemming from patriarchal impositions on women which eventually lead to her madness is summed up by one of the most quoted metaphors from the text about the fig tree. "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..." (Plath 95). The fig tree sums up Esther's dilemma of reconciling the idea of

normative femininity with her ambitions. This metaphor describes a woman's conflict between having "a husband and a happy home and children" or being "a famous poet" or "a brilliant professor" (Plath 94). According to Perloff, Esther's "dilemma seems to have a great deal to do with being a woman in a society whose guidelines for women she can neither accept nor reject." This dilemma is a major factor in rendering her hopeless and pushing her towards suicidal tendencies which leads to eventual institutionalisation.

Though Esther is eventually discharged at the end of the narrative, there is much to uncover under the seemingly hopeful ending. Plath subverts the success of institutionalisation through an ambiguous description of Esther's recovery. While Esther is relieved from the facility, Plath hints at her possible relapse, "The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air... How do I know that the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, would not descend again?" The ending of the novel once again hints at social control exercised by mental facilities and critiques the psychiatric treatments rendered solely to make a person fit into conventional society instead of addressing the root of their mental problems and helping accordingly.

The Bell Jar challenges the patriarchal silencing of women and critiques the institution of psychiatry as an agent of social control. The text substantiates Chesler and Foucault's theories through Plath's personal experience of how societal gender norms pushed her to insanity and how the institution of psychiatry only functions to perpetuate the dominant power hierarchies in place. Furthermore, Plath revolts against this oppression through a rejection of not only patriarchal ideologies but also patriarchal language through her inception of unique narrative strategies, a language of her own, as illustrated through her metaphors, diction, imagery, characters and so on. The thesis therefore proves how the literary is inevitably linked with the social and how the genre of life writing functions as a form of not only social critique but also social change.

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